

My Approach to Interpreting Art and Religion

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Most high quality artists and all true religious believers experience the subjective reality directly through either the various genres of their art or the ritual/myth of their religion. Indeed, at a minimum these individuals understand the subjective as the core source for their art and religion, and their art and religion both provide the avenue to the subjective and are the expression in the objective of subjective awareness. For these people art and religion are themselves the proof of the subjective.

My challenge as an academic and as an interpreter of art and religion in a culture that defines itself in largely empirical and objective terms is two fold in this situation. First, I face the strongly held belief by most academics – even most academics in the humanities, that a subjective or spiritual domain of reality does not exist. Second, I must deal with some artists and most fundamentalist religious believers who take literally their artistic and religious expressions and accounts of the subjective.

Facing this situation, there are at least three directions I can take. First, I can join the empiricists and insist that art and religion are symbolic projections emanating from objective reality – personality and society – and that any reference to a subjective reality is illusory. This is the pervasive position within academics in both the social sciences and humanities, and to locate one's work outside of it is to invite being marginalized professionally. Second, I can join some artists and most fundamentalist religious believers and insist that the characterizations in art and religion are literally true in defining subjective reality. I can even claim that this subjective dimension is the “real” or primary dimension and that material/empirical reality is the illusion. Third, I can accept that art and religion are symbolic expressions of the subjective and that while the symbols are just symbols and not literally “true,” the dimension of experience and awareness that they reference through imagaic and narrative metaphor is real. I elect this third perspective.

There are variants within this third symbolic position. One of these – Jungian, analytical or archetypal psychology, which I find problematic, holds that while traditional art and religion are symbolic, there exists a “true” system of structures in human consciousness/unconsciousness [the collective unconscious and various categories of differentiated archetypes] that underlies

“Big Dreams” and all of the traditional artistic and religious systems, and that it is this underlying system – when filled with appropriate symbols – that references the subjective. While this position is intriguing and resembles my own, it requires human mentation and a variety of separate structures within it that are difficult to claim for the rest of existence. As such, all non-human existence is pretty much left out of the picture for meaningful involvement in the subjective since it does not possess these human mental structures. In my view, this variant position suffers from both its hypothetical structural complexity and its anthropocentric focus. I believe there is a simpler, more inclusive, and more adequate variation within the symbolic third interpretive perspective. And in science when two theories are being evaluated, the simpler explanation that can demonstrate supporting empirical evidence and that accounts for the most data is the one that usually prevails.

The essential problem in working from symbolic expressions in art and religion to “prove” the subjective is that symbols have many different potential “meanings.” And as long as reasonable arguments can be made by cultural experts for these meanings being based in empirical/material reality, there is no “proof” that their source is the subjective. And these experts are plenteous and their arguments are pervasive. In spite of facing this situation, most third position symbolic interpreters of the subjective just keep repeating their claims based upon analyses of symbolic expressions alone. I take a different tack along with a few others – almost all of whom are focused on understanding human consciousness itself rather than on interpreting the meaning and significance of art and religion per se. I look for non-symbolic empirical evidence for the subjective or spiritual dimension of reality. And I find it mainly in the basic principles and conditions that have come to inform modern theories in the physics of the very small [micro] and the very large [macro - astro and cosmic], and in the evidence for the array of different psychic phenomena [Psi] of which humans are capable. Humans exist on the continuum of material reality between the micro and the macro, and if physics tells us anything it is that the principles that apply at the two ends of the spectrum of physical reality must apply in the middle as well. Psi constitutes some of the best evidence that this is the case and that human behavior itself is at least in part defined by these same principles and conditions.

What are these principles and conditions? 1) All things that appear separate from an empirical/objective point of view are in fact connected, and so fundamentally connected that ultimately they share in a singular identity. 2) Time and space of any and all degrees do not constitute barriers to experiencing and operating within this sphere of interconnectedness. 3) All of existence, including humans, is circumscribed by this condition. 4) Survival in a

competitive environment necessitates that sensate entities engage reality from an objective perspective where time, space and separation are fundamental, and so humans, as higher order sensate beings, are significantly keyed perceptually and cognitively to engage reality from this perspective in conducting their day-to-day affairs. 5) But all entities always participate in the interconnected [subjective] reality as well, and while humans are in fact always housed within this subjective envelope, they can employ certain mental states which emphasize and highlight their presence within and awareness of the subjective. 6) In these facilitating mental states [which I refer to as intuitive competence in contrast to intellectual or rational competence in the objective], humans experience both highly improved access to the domain of interconnectedness as well as interaction within this domain to empirical effects, effects in the form of information and physical transformation and translocation, effects which cannot be accounted for from the perspective of objective material reality.

With these same principles and conditions in hand from physics and Psi, I look at the descriptions by artists and religious believers of the artistic and religious experiences from within these experiences. And the similarities are striking with the worldview being essentially identical. This situation should really come as no surprise since most ascetic traditions within major religions recognize Psi as a prominent manifestation in the experience of the religious seeker. And of course there are the accounts of miracles in religious traditions which are outstanding examples of Psi. So, I can argue that the core principles from empirical research in modern physics and Psi regarding the subjective correspond to the characteristic features of the core human artistic and religious experiences. The specific content in these artistic and religious experiences as they emerge to and are reported in the objective is hugely varied but the underlying principles and conditions are the same.

Given this situation, it is my view that the essence of the subjective lies in these principles and conditions and not in the specific and highly varied content that expresses them for humans in the objective. Art and religion thereby become the symbolic or metaphorical expressions in objective reality of these subjective experiences and this awareness, and they offer avenues to these experiences and this awareness for those that participate in them. And, while allowing for the importance of the subjective, I can nevertheless agree with the reductionist skeptics that Art and Religion, as creative constructions and as institutions in the objective, also reflect to a considerable extent aspects of objective reality [society and personality]. But I can contend that these reflections are secondary – not the primary source or motive for these behaviors. In this way, I can justify the proposal that Art and Religion are conduits to the subjective from the

objective and that they express in symbolic form the awareness and experience of the subjective or spiritual realm in the objective. It is by following this line of reasoning that I conclude that Art and Religion are not themselves the subjective or literal representations of the subjective. They are not literally True in themselves, but they access and express in symbolic form a Truth that is of great importance.

In the debate between the literalists of all different persuasions and the skeptics who would deny any reality to the subjective or spiritual, the above position is my view and my argument for the reality of the subjective and the relationship of art and religion to it. I can make this argument intellectually and from non-symbolic empirical evidence, and in this way I have a chance to garner the attention of research academics as well as make the case for much needed change throughout the fabric of materially, empirically, and rationally focused modern civilization. Much of my writing argues for the need for these more specific societal changes and justifies them by highlighting the necessity of recognizing and respecting the principles in the subjective or spiritual domain of reality as exemplified empirically in Psi and symbolically in Art and Religion.