

# Meta-Aesthetics and Meta-Methodology: A Response to Andy Sanders Review Essay

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I had a strange dream the other night. Two elderly gentlemen were sitting on a park bench engaged in a philosophical discussion. I came on the scene long after the discussion between the two had started. I started taking notes, but the notes were incomplete. Suddenly the two men departed from the scene and I had nothing to go on but my partial rendering of a discussion that I had come upon long after it had started. So, I was faced with the decision whether to discard my notes altogether or reconstruct the debate. On the one side, if I were to discard my notes, I would lose for myself what I thought would be an enlightening and intellectually crucial discussion. On the other side, if I were to reconstruct their discussion from my incomplete notes, I would create a somewhat fictional and false account of their discussion. I chose the latter course of action: perhaps my misinterpretation might shed some understanding on a rather complex but fundamental problem.

The problem I believe I heard the two talking about was a modernized version of Plato's Meno problem. The modernized version concerned the role of method in scientific discovery. One of the elderly gentlemen apparently claimed that scientists use what he called tacit knowledge in the process of scientific discovery. In a sentence, tacit knowledge is the hidden background for what we know. I know there is a lot more to tacit knowledge than I have said, and I doubt I have said what can be said in a sentence. The other elderly gentleman put forward what seemed to me to be a contrary view: scientific discovery involved the use of the method of conjecture and refutation. I listened intently to their discussion and took many notes; and, many times I attempted to interrupt and ask questions. But they did not pay any attention to my interruptions and continued their discussion without stop. I wish I had had a video camera, or, at least a tape recorder. If only I could have slowed them down and if only they would have attended to my one simple question: Gentlemen, do scientists learn from having critical discussions with one another?

My dream took a strange twist at this point. The two gentlemen reappeared in the head of a third elderly gentleman and I somehow could hear them talking about my question in the head of this third man. But I was also talking to this third man about the nature of aesthetics and the role of method in art. The voices of the two other men somehow came out through the mouth of this third man. The third man said, aesthetics is impossible because the appreciation of artistic value can only be learned through personal contact with experts or connoisseurs. Then, the third man said in another voice that artists improve their work through the method of trial and error. I said to the third man that he seemed to be contradicting himself: artistic discovery occurs according to a method; but, the appreciation of the products of this method occurs with a judgment that one gains through apprenticeship to connoisseurs. Can we have both in art: method and personal judgment?

The third man suddenly jumped up and said that he must run. I tried to delay him and while grabbing on to his coat, he turned into a fourth person. This fourth person was somewhat younger, and a bit brash and what some would call rude.

He turned to me and said, you don't know what you are talking about. I meekly replied yes. I am no artist and I am no scientist, so I don't know art and I don't know science. He said, if you don't know them, don't talk about them. I then asked, you mean I should be silent about that which I don't know. No, you must talk, but talk about the talk about art and science. I was puzzled. He explained to me what the strategy he called meta-aesthetics and meta-methodology would involve. His explanation went something like this: Aesthetics asks, what are the criteria for artistic judgment? Meta-aesthetics asks, can we critically discuss the alternative answers to the question of what the aesthetic criteria are? Methodology asks, what methods do scientists use? Meta-methodology asks, can we critically discuss the answers to the question of what methods scientists use? He then asked me: you do see the parallel don't you? Before I could respond, he threw several hundred books and several thousand articles at me.

The books and articles kept falling out of the sky. Before I could finish writing a note, a new book appeared. But then the third man returned and remarked in a mocking tone: Ha—philosophers don't read. When they do read, they misread. I wasn't sure which of the original two elderly gentlemen were speaking. Or was that his own genuine voice? Do any of us have a genuine voice? Or, do we all speak the distorted voices of other voices? These questions tormented me. Was my dream turning into a nightmare? What started out as me listening to a wonderful discussion between two wise philosophers turned into me hearing distorted echoes of conversations by poor mimics. I wondered whether I could retrieve the original conversation by the original thinkers themselves.

The fourth person reappeared and said in his brusque, no nonsense manner. Wake up Sheldon, the two old men you talk about didn't talk together at all. You waste your time in this silly dream of a conversation between the two who turned their backs to each other.

I woke up. I still wonder whether those who think that science grows by the use of method can talk to those who think that science grows through the use of tacit knowledge; and, I still wonder whether those who think that artistic appreciation involves the use of aesthetic criteria can talk to those who think that artistic appreciation is a matter of connoisseurship.

Here is a suggestion: May we drop the question, "who are the genuine interpreters, scholars, and heirs of Popper and Polanyi?", and just talk the talk—i.e., how does science grow? how do artists create? how do scientists and artists learn from each other? how do people learn? when do we know that we have learned? where, with whom, when, and how can we talk so that we can learn from each other? In other words, my suggestion is: Let's each speak with our own voices and find for ourselves where the conversations lead.