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Knowing yourself through art: The bees and the artist

In this paper I address the Hegelian commandment “know thyself” from an artistic point of view. As Hegel famously claimed, art is one of the most effective forms of self-knowledge. Indeed, according to him, artistic creations have much more to do with *truth* (namely with the representation of the authentic essence of the human being) than with *beauty* (namely with the adequacy of a material object with its concept): art is therefore, in a broad sense, a kind of anthropology. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the birth of art as the gradual overcoming of nature by human consciousness. In this process, one pivotal problem is connected with the appearance of the earliest works of Egyptian architecture. Indeed, Hegel describes these artifacts *both* as the outcome of “an instinctive operation, like the building of a honeycomb by bees” *and* as a product of an activity that “constitutes self-consciousness”. The first aim of the paper is to understand this apparent tension. The second (and more general) aim is to show that in Hegel’s consideration of the deficiencies of these early creative attempts of humankind we may find an important insight into the anthropological issue: we will understand that unlike the Egyptian “artisans” and like the artist, the genuine human being is able to *transform given spiritual contents* and *creatively adapt* them to new social and historical conditions.

According to Hegel’s account of the birth of art, as it is presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, art emerges in the transition between two forms of religion, namely natural religion and religion in the form of art. In natural religion the divine reality (the object towards which adoration is directed) is an immediate element of the physical world: the sun, a mountain, an animal, a river. However, the religious consciousness is caught in some irresolvable contradictions¹ and is no longer satisfied with finding the divine in nature. Thus, it needs to create objects of worship and devotion. Temples, sculptures and paintings become the objects in which the divine is present and dwells.

¹ For a wider account of the deficiencies of natural religion, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford, 1977, 419. From now on, I will refer to this work as Hegel, *Phenomenology*, followed by the page number. In this case Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 419.