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The Creative Philosophies of Leonardo da Vinci:

Nature as the Perfect Creator

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Balzer

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Leonardo da Vinci is regarded as having one of the most dynamic and well-rounded geniuses' in human history, as demonstrated by his impacts on nearly every discipline of the sciences and the arts. Leonardo's presence in life may have been humble, but the mark he left upon the world continues to define him as no less than, *the Renaissance Man*. Leonardo kept a comprehensive record of his thoughts in the form of many notebooks that work to preserve the mind behind his masterpieces. His philosophy reads almost as a stream of consciousness, illustrating a wide breadth of perspectives. He was a natural philosopher of his time and much of his inspiration came directly from observing the world around him, he said that "the senses are of the Earth, the reason stands apart from them in contemplation."¹ This view of the natural world as something to be observed, learned from, and contemplated was the root force behind his creation. A multitude of factors went into forming the genius that was Leonardo, including his hometown of Florence and the philosophical works of antiquity. But apart from academia, his most profound inspiration was nature. Leonardo da Vinci's perception of nature as a divine and perfect entity was profoundly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy which, in turn, became the driving force behind his desire to create.

Leonardo grew up in Florence amidst the boom of the Italian Renaissance. This period was characterized by a newfound understanding of human capabilities, known as humanism, accompanied by a resurgence of texts and concepts from antiquity. For a master artist in the making, it was an ideal cradle. Greek and Roman antiquity provided a wealth of inspiration for the arts and sciences throughout the Italian Renaissance and "Florentines of the 15th century

¹ Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, Philosophy, 67.

were fired anew by the classical love of nature and gardens.”² Once more, nature was a center of enjoyment as a part of the larger belief in people’s right to experience life’s range of pleasures. Recognizing nature’s place in relation to human existence was a forgotten concept due to the reign of Catholicism and its overall devaluation of living. Religion at the time stressed the importance of living a life that earned you a place in heaven, and many activities were branded as sinful. The church placed human indulgences under scrutiny, including the appreciation of nature. Pope Innocent III was one of the boldest proprietors of this ideology as shown in his text, *On the Misery of the Human Condition*. Innocent referred to humans as being, “born only to die. He commits depraved acts by which he offends God... vain acts by which he ignores all things important, useful, and necessary.”³ These words not only defined the pre-Renaissance view of humanity but also the position of the Catholic church. They used their immense power of voice to preach not on the subject of life’s merits, but rather how humanity constantly moves to disappoint their creator. The stark shift away from this mindset, known as humanism, made way for the expansive potential of Europeans that had been so very stifled in the past. Therefore the acceptance of humanism into Europe changed the way people interpreted these activities, allowing a much more free-thinking perspective on both the role of individuals as well as collective humanity. The overarching tone of human potential and nature’s value were paramount in defining Leonardo’s creative philosophies, in the words of Leonardo, “to the ambitious, whom neither the boon of life, nor the beauty of the world suffice to content, it comes

² Brian Morley. “The Plant Illustrations of Leonardo da Vinci,” *The Burlington Magazine* 121, no. 918 (1979): 553-562, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/879737>.

³ Lothario de Segni, *On the Misery of the Human Condition*.

as penance that life with them is squandered, and that they possess neither the benefits nor the beauty of the world.”⁴

With the resurgence of Greek texts came Aristotle’s philosophical book known as *Metaphysics*. Many topics fall under the umbrella of metaphysics, but Aristotle’s beliefs on empiricism and the human senses are among the most profound. Unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle was a firm believer in the ability of individuals to interpret their environments and then draw conclusions from said observations. His work developed into the methods behind scientific data collection as well as observing things for the purpose of creative or philosophical expression. *Metaphysics* itself fostered the “scholastic conception of the science of supra-sensible reality as the science of being.”⁵ The ability to accurately perceive reality by means of the human senses re-inspired many renaissance minds to study the world around them. Aristotle’s philosophies recognized the individual abilities that each human carries, thus providing intellectuals with reason to trust themselves. “For him the particular speculative sciences, like physics and mathematics, are philosophical”⁶, and the intersection of philosophy and the sciences is the basis of what made his work so unique and influential to the budding minds of scholarship. Without his contributions to the Italian Renaissance there would not likely have been such a rapid development in the arts or sciences.

Aristotle's philosophies transcended disciplinary boundaries and were an immense influence, most presently to Leonardo da Vinci, and the writings of both men hold many key

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 63.

⁵ Charles H. Lohr. “Metaphysics,” in *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 535-638, doi: 10.1017/CHOL9780521251044.018.

⁶ Charles H. Lohr, *Metaphysics*, 535-638

similarities. When more broadly delving into Aristotelian philosophy it's clear how much he valued art as a form of expression and knowledge. To Aristotle, artists were the greatest teachers for they knew how to create from their raw perception of the world around them. In book 1 of *Metaphysics* he explores the issue of how individuals experience living, and how distorted those experiences can become, as an issue of time or simply by fault of the mind. He explains that, "the human race lives also by art and reasonings. Now from memory experience is produced in men... And experience seems pretty much like science and art, but really science and art come to men through experience; for 'experience made art', as Polus says."⁷ This is an important perspective to understand because it states clearly the position of an artist in terms of representing reality. Aristotle believed that both science and art are perfectly philosophical manners of comprehending the human condition, and though he wasn't an artist himself he still acknowledged their prowess. This notion is exactly what inspired the surge of creation and recognition for artists within the renaissance, as shown through the acceptance of antiquity as a model, as well as the many references to his work. Aristotle's influence was paramount throughout the Italian Renaissance and his writing was a source of validation for creatives and their work. The success of Greco-Roman society and its implementation of the arts within regular factions became evidence for contemporaries of 15th century Europe to do the same. Further in the same book he reiterates the power of art in saying, "therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot."⁸ Not only are artists able to accurately depict reality but they are teachers of this reality. This

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 1, ed. W. D. Ross

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.

belief not only defined the period of Leonardo's creation but it was a clear nod to his individual philosophies, shedding a light onto the formation of the ways in which he viewed existence.

Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks are full of his ideas in all forms, but the area in which he most represents Aristotelian ideals are his philosophical notes. They range from short anecdotes to full paragraphs, with a majority of them surrounding nature, and man's place within her bounty. His deep analytical observations of the environment were a direct source of inspiration for his art as well as his many theories and inventions. He saw nature as not only perfect but equally self-sustaining and he understood that there was much to be learned from its inner workings.

Leonardo absorbed Aristotle's views on empiricism and earthly observation as a framework for his creative process. Trust in the human senses and the power of contemplation were universally significant to both men and their work, giving way to their everlasting impacts on the arts and sciences. This phenomenon is due to both Aristotle's overarching presence in Italian scholasticism as well as Leonardo's own reference to Aristotle's books. Leonardo mentioned both *Metaphysics* and *Ethics* within his philosophical notes and often rewrote Aristotle's statements amongst his own. Leonardo wrote, "Aristotle in the Third [Book] of the Ethics: man is worthy of praise and blame solely in respect of such actions as it is within his power to do or abstain from,"⁹ a quite humanist conception of man's capabilities within the world. He also mentioned that, "Aristotle says that everything desires to keep its own nature,"¹⁰ yet another philosophy that Leonardo found to be powerful enough to keep within his own. Leonardo's direct quotation as well as paraphrasing of Aristotelian philosophies show just how important

⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 65.

¹⁰ Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 88.

they were to his work. Without the methodologies of Aristotle, Leonardo would not have been as exquisite of a creator.

The overwhelming appreciation of nature and her elements within their philosophies point to just how crucial of a motivator it was. Leonardo understood Mother Nature as being a creator of all that surrounds us, including himself, and this is why he chose to so perfectly depict it within his art. He saw, “Nature being capricious and taking pleasure in creating and producing a continuous succession of lives and forms”¹¹, this personification of nature as a creator is a parallel to Leonardo’s perception of himself. He harnessed his creative talents to most accurately replicate the wonders of nature, and this is something he took immense pride in. His desire to maximize the human potential within himself was largely tied to his same desire to understand the natural world’s perfection.

Not only did Leonardo desire to perfect himself through representing nature, but he equally criticized the wrongful understandings that empiricism can foster. He addresses those who live in a constant state of high-expectation: “Wrongly do men cry out against experience and with bitter reproaches accuse her of deceitfulness. Let experience alone, and rather turn your complaints against your own ignorance, which causes you to be so carried away by your vain and insensate desires as to expect from experience things which are not within her power!”¹² This not only shows the rise of empiricism within Italian culture but also its eventual faults when incorrectly interpreted. Leonardo, like his predecessor Aristotle, believed that observation should be more or less a passive gain of understanding, as to not disturb the natural state of whatever he may have been observing. The pitfall in carrying lofty expectations is that you will likely defeat

¹¹Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 74.

¹² Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 64.

the overall purpose of learning from said experience altogether. This excerpt is also essential when understanding Leonardo's opinion of man as more than a little imperfect. The juxtaposition of his philosophical views on men and nature reemphasize the value he places on the latter.

Nature has a way of dictating her own existence without fault, he describes it as her seemingly knowing exactly what to do. Unlike humanity, who bears a litany of faults stemming from our perceptual egos and modes of disorting true reality- assuming that true reality is as we see it. He took this viewpoint as a form of motivation for himself and channeled it into obtaining an ultimate closeness to perfection.

Leonardo contrasted man and nature as a way to demonstrate their dichotomy of perfection. His commentary on their relationship often came back to human mistreatment of the natural world. He placed an immense amount of care and importance on allowing nature to exist as she so desires. This makes him not only a conservationist but a preservationist. He states that, "you do not perceive that you are falling into the same error as does he who strips a tree of its adornment of branches laden with leaves intermingled with fragrant flowers or fruits, in order to demonstrate the suitability of the tree for making planks."¹³ This piece has layers of thought around the shortsightedness of man, the implications of taking without understanding, and the under-respected beauty of nature. Leonardo again is criticizing the people he sees around him that don't acknowledge all the effort that nature takes to create, instead they see it only as amenities for humanity. The way he speaks about the trees with such poetic eloquence makes it clear how he perceives them, as works of art. To him, the tree holds such an intrinsic value all on

¹³Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 84.

its own, so much so that the tree adorns itself, though not for any benefit to man. Rather the tree adorns itself because it can, and because it's a perfect piece of art created by nature herself.

With the basis of Leonardo da Vinci's philosophy involving man and nature as both separate and interconnected entities, there's the present question of how these philosophies affected his creative pursuits. As previously stated he was the Renaissance man and imparted himself into nearly every possible discipline, making his philosophical impact all the more important. "Leonardo writes: 'Good men possess a natural desire to know'. He is elaborating here on Aristotle's opening statement in his *Metaphysics*: 'All men by nature desire to have knowledge'"¹⁴ this being the exact connection that fed Leonardo's curiosities. Creating was his way of tapping into his desire for knowledge. He explored many pathways in which to better understand his environment, with the root of his inspiration coming from the environment itself. For Leonardo, nature was the greatest example and source of creativity. Its presence as a self-sustaining entity of creation and of perfection gave him the drive as an artist to represent it in the most perfect way. He saw nature as a teacher, and an example of true creativity in the world. Without this acceptance, he would not have been the creator that he was. He himself said that "painting is born of nature – or, to speak more correctly, we shall call it the grandchild of nature, for all visible things were brought forth by nature, and those her children have given birth to painting".¹⁵ Leonardo saw a mutualistic relationship between human creativity and the natural world in such a way that to him the art of painting was a manifestation of nature. Natural

¹⁴ Liana de Girolami Cheney. "Leonardo da Vinci Uffizi Annunciation: The Holy Spirit," *Artibus et Historiae* 32, no. 63 (January 2011): 39-53, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/docview/1321667791?accountid=13265>.

¹⁵ Liana de Girolami Cheney, *Leonardo da Vinci Uffizi Annunciation: The Holy Spirit*, 39-53.

philosophy was comparable to a religion for Leonardo, bringing him comfort and clarity in his lifetime.

His belief in nature was both literal and spiritual. In a biological sense, nature is a creator of lifeforms and from the aspect of Leonardo that was a scientist, this is how he understood it. But from the portion of his mind that was a philosopher and an artist, he saw nature as a personified female entity with wills and whims of creation. This combination is what challenged him as a creator himself. He was in part a passive observer of nature as a student of Aristotelian philosophies, but equally he was an active experimenter. Nature was something palpable that he could devote his life to understanding on a variety of depths. His famed interdisciplinary studies were for the purpose of best representing what he saw to already exist in the natural world. Science was an effort to understand the complexities of living beings and what they're made of. Art was an effort to represent those complexities with the beauty that they beheld naturally. Inventing was an effort to replicate Nature's ability to create. And in a summary of all his disciplinary endeavors, his philosophy was a mode of compiling these many understandings. His philosophy "not only shares the humanist's views about the significance of the individual, but he also defines these views in relation to nature, art and beauty"¹⁶, making his perspectives extremely well-rounded. Leonardo is already highly regarded for his impacts on culture and human understanding as a whole, but his relationship to nature as creative power is worthy of more attention.

Beyond the information we already have about Leonardo da Vinci's plethora of works, there has been less focus on the reasons why he had such a motivation to create. The Aristotelian

¹⁶ Liana de Girolami Cheney, *Leonardo da Vinci Uffizi Annunciation: The Holy Spirit*, 39-53.

philosophies around nature and human perception shaped the creative and philosophical works of Leonardo da Vinci. Seeing him in a new light, one of overwhelming inspiration, adds another layer to the story of his being. He was a genius and nobody denies that fact, but the untapped realm is what drove his individual genius. His natural philosophy and preservationist attitudes around nature provide a niche outlook on what was a crucial influence. Further concepts to develop this field are potentially how natural philosophy affected the depth of his specific projects, and even the psychology of nature and creativity. Naturalism within the Italian Renaissance is a well understood influence but much less so was its influence on creative philosophies and even habitual perceptions. We will never truly know all of the ways in which he thought about the world or nature or man's place within it all, but there's truly no shortage of material to analyze when expanding on Leonardo and his mind.

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