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The intuitive dimension of art - an approach to the theory of Henri Bergson

Dr. Djamel Beroual

Abbas Laghrour University of Khenchela (Algeria)

e-mail: beroual.djamel@univ-khenchela.dz

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Abstract:

The subject of art and aesthetic values has long attracted the attention of thinkers and scholars—particularly aesthetic philosophers—who have studied it from diverse perspectives, exploring its origins, nature, components, foundations, and dimensions. This research has led to the formulation of numerous concepts and theories; notable among them is the theory of art proposed by the contemporary French philosopher Henri Bergson who created a distinctive concept of art that situated within his philosophy of life, which identifies intuition and duration as foundation in order to liberate art from mechanical frameworks, abstract rationalism, and social stagnation.

This article aims to explore Bergson's inner intuitive vision of artistic experience, which represents one of the most significant philosophical approaches to art in general, and to contemporary French philosophy in particular.

Keywords: art, intuition, Henri Bergson, theory, French philosophy.

Introduction:

At its core, philosophy serves as a comprehensive description of human experience; consequently, the philosophical analysis and understanding of aesthetic experience—or the phenomenon of art—have long constituted a significant part of philosophical research, to the point where it became a distinct branch of philosophy. This interest is reflected in the work of thinkers and researchers: while some have dedicated specific chapters to the subject, others have devoted entire books to it. This is because human beings are, in essence, creatures with aesthetic dimensions, having the capacity to appreciate and make aesthetic judgments regarding various subjects, whether referring to the elements surrounding him in nature or those he has creatively fashioned through various art forms, man possesses a desire to produce tangible works that embody aesthetic



and ideological dimensions, reflecting his direct inclination toward artistic creation. Indeed, no civilization of any people or nation throughout history has been devoid of artistic projects or heritage and with the evolution of art, it became a subject of philosophical research and emerged as a distinct, independent field known as the "philosophy of art" which has since been the focus of numerous and diverse studies. This is evident in the multiplicity and diversity of their philosophical orientations and currents manifested throughout history across various artistic movements and schools, such as idealism, realism, absurdism, Marxism, and intuitionism. Past centuries have witnessed significant developments in artistic movements, marked by the emergence of schools and currents with diverse orientations and objectives. Furthermore, Western philosophy has undergone an epistemological and intellectual revolution regarding the critical and theoretical conceptualization of the philosophy of art, artistic creativity, and aesthetics throughout the ages, beginning with the philosophies of the modern age that sought to critique both preceding and contemporary philosophies, most notably the critical approach of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, as articulated in his renowned work "Critique of pure reason" (regarding judgments of the beautiful in terms of the satisfaction derived from the object, and the modalities of possibility and necessity), as well as Hegel's idealist perspective, which interpreted art through the lens of the Absolute. It extended to contemporary philosophies that, in turn, sought to break away from modern philosophy, surpassing the very principles and methodologies upon which the latter was founded. Among the most prominent philosophies to take this critical task was that of Henri Bergson and its new methodology, which emerged as a pioneering school of thought within contemporary philosophy.

Contemporary philosophy was founded on a basis entirely different from the principles of modern philosophy—which relied on the concept of natural science as well as the principles of reason and experience—and shapes its position on issues of knowledge, ethics, and all other matters, including art and aesthetic taste.

This article aims to delve into and explore the content of Bergson's vision—or theory—which reflects the intuitive dimension and orientation of art. The central problem it addresses is: How did Bergson view art? What was his fundamental starting point and principle in this regard? And what are the limitations of his interpretations or theory?

1- Henri Bergson: An overview of his life, works, and philosophy.

1-1- His Life: Henri Bergson (1859–1941) is considered a leading figure in contemporary French philosophy. During his lifetime, he was widespread renown in France, influencing diverse circles philosophical, religious, and literary. He introduced a distinct type of thought and style of expression, leaving his mark on the intellectual landscape of the 1950s; he sought to save values undermined by materialism, affirming his belief in spiritual values. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1927. Born in Paris, he was the son of the composer and pianist

Michal Bergson—who was of Polish-Jewish descent—and a mother of English heritage. He was educated at the Lycée Condorcet and subsequently at the École Normale Supérieure, where he was steered toward philosophical studies; while he had shown an aptitude for mathematics and physics from an early age, he also excelled in the humanities. He studied under the renowned French philosopher Émile Boutroux and immersed himself in Greek literature. He was influenced by Herbert Spencer's philosophy of evolution; early in his philosophical career, it appeared to him that Spencer's philosophy alone matches reality, and that his own philosophical work emerged from his attempt to delve deeply into the fundamentals of Spencer's system. In 1891, he obtained a "licence des lettres" (Bachelor of Arts), followed by habilitation to direct research from the University of Paris. That same year, after graduating from the École Normale Supérieure, he was hired as a philosophy teacher at the Lycée d'Angrès; he subsequently transferred between various secondary schools before finally settling at the Lycée Blaise-Pascal. Bergson demonstrated his aptitude in the humanities by publishing a selection of excerpts from Lucretius, accompanied by a critical study of "De Rerum Natura". He was subsequently hired in the French Academy in recognition of his contributions to science and philosophy. However, Bergson soon incurred the hostility of certain members of the clergy after his works appeared on the list of prohibited books issued by the Pope to the faithful. In his later years, he devoted himself to writing his monumental work, "The Two Sources of Morality and Religion"—published in 1932 after a twenty-five-year hiatus from publishing—which created a stir in the philosophical world. In his will, written in 1937 and published after his death in 1941, he announced his conversion to Catholicism. (Abbas, 1996, p. 213)

1-2- His Works: Henri Bergson left behind a number of works, including: "Time and Free Will" (published 1889), "Matter and Memory" (1896), "Creative Evolution" (1907), "Laughter" (1900), "Mind-Energy" (1919), "Duration and Simultaneity" (1922), "The Creative Mind" (1934), and "The Two Sources of Morality and Religion" (1932)—the last of which is considered his most famous work, embodying his moral philosophy.

1-3 - His Intuitive Approach: In his philosophy, Henri Bergson focused on suitable concepts to study intellectual and metaphysical issues, foremost among them is art, and among the concepts formulated in this context we find "intuition," which he adopted as a specific method for studying qualitative subjects (such as art).

For this reason, Henri Bergson belongs to the school of intuitionism; indeed, he is its foremost pioneer. Intuition is regarded as a direct method of perceiving and knowing things, requiring neither intermediaries nor inference; unlike the various forms of inference, such as deduction, induction, and analogy and it does not proceed by gradual steps. At its core, it is a singular form of knowledge that does not rely on any specific individual or other person; rather, it demands a unique kind of experience that is difficult to convey to others through mere description.

Bergson's conception of intuition differs from all other forms of intuition in its starting point: he presents it as the specific faculty for perceiving inner time—or lived, conscious time—and the flow of our conscious life.

Bergson's philosophy emerged as a reaction against the dominance of materialism—a current that had flourished due to the scientific discoveries and inventions of the nineteenth century. Bergson rejected intellect viewing it merely as the instrument of science and scientific knowledge; instead he stood up for intuition as the true instrument of philosophy and philosophical knowledge.

Bergson draws a distinction between science and philosophy, regarding them as divergent and distinct intellectual approaches, each possessing its own subject matter, methodology, and tools. Science deals with matter, relies on external sensory experience, and derives from conceptual understanding; philosophy, in the other hand, concerns itself with the spirit, employs the method of inner experience, and based on intuition, a faculty rooted in spiritual empathy or a higher form of instinct. (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 1962, pp. 40-46). Intuition serves as a pathway through which the human being conducts a form of spiritual examination of reality, sensing and perceiving its very pulse. Matter constitutes the arena in which the intellect operates—its domain being quantity, extension, and space. The intellect is analytical; it breaks down any system into its constituent laws before reconstructing them, relying on the analysis, classification, and fragmentation of sensory subjects.

The intellect is not suitable to grasp duration; therefore, it has no recourse but intuition, with intuition we know duration directly and from within. Then, what do understanding and intuition signifies for Bergson?

For Bergson, intellect is a power that enables us to create tools—whether material or mental—yet it does not allow us to penetrate the inner essence of things or grasp "becoming". This is because the concepts and words formed through our encounter with matter distort and deaden whatever lies beyond their scope. Intuition, on the other hand, is the power, by which we recognize real time—or "duration"—which must not be confused with the spatialized time (clock time). (François, 1985, p. 69) Bergson expanded its scope of application; it no longer referred merely to our direct perception of the inner flow of our lives. (Huwaidi, 1989, p. 152). It serves as a gateway to knowledge: "Intuition alone reigns supreme on the throne of human knowledge, possessing power, existence, and life." (Medjahed, 1998, p. 29) True knowledge is attained only through intuition; it is a form of direct perception that surpasses the intellect—an inner awareness through which we penetrate to the very core of our psychological duration.

According to Bergson, the function of the human intellect is precisely similar to that of a cinematograph: it slices and fragments reality into segments devoid of life and motion, analyzing and deconstructing in order to facilitate action. Intuition, by contrast, engages with the dynamic organic—with that which is in a state of

movement and evolution. It alone grasps "duration", it is the only way to know a thing in its entirety and wholeness, a mode of vision that neither deconstructs nor reconstructs, but rather perceives "duration" in its true essence. (Abbas, 1996, pp. 215-216)

Philosophy advances only when it embraces intuition as a method and viewing it as an innate light residing within us. It is a faculty capable of grasping "becoming" and the means by which we recognize true time, or "duration" It leads us to perceive the deep self, something that society and language seek to conceal from us, and which finds its truest expression only in the free act, yet, such acts are rare, for we often live outside our own selves, influenced more by our surroundings than we influence them. (Bergson, *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 1948, pp. 127-130). For Bergson, the free act is a rarity. The same applies to the heroes, saints, geniuses, mystics, and artists who innovate within their societies; societies where religion and morality often function as a set of coercive rules. These figures liberate people from the grip of rigid traditions and elevate them above the state of animals, which live in submission to the laws of nature. It is in this context that his compatriot Gilles Deleuze remarked: "Intuition is the method of Bergsonism." "Intuition is neither mere emotion, nor inspiration, nor a vague attraction; rather, it is a highly prepared method, indeed, one of the most rigorously structured philosophical methods controlled by strict rules that constitute what Bergson calls "duration" in philosophy. Methodologically understood, intuition presupposes duration. These considerations regarding time were decisive, elevating intuition, step by step, to the status of a philosophical method. (Deleuze, 1997, pp. 5-7)

Duration, in turn, serves as the starting point for Bergsonian philosophy across all its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. Defining it as the foundation of his philosophical theory, Bergson wrote: "Any summary of my theories would inevitably distort them as a whole and expose them to criticism—unless the researcher, from the very outset, consistently returns to the principle I regard as the axis of my entire approach: the vision of duration." (Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 2009, p. 216)

Duration is inherent in the whole universe, extending even to the smallest constituent parts of the world we live in ; the universe has duration, and the deeper we delve into the nature of time, the more we realize that the meaning of duration lies in invention, the creation of forms, and the continuous generation of news.

Duration is lived—or psychological—time, which is the true time; consequently, Bergson criticizes philosophers for neglecting this form of time—which represents reality for him—in favor of a spatialized time, which is instrumental or material time.

Bergson assigns distinct spheres to both science and philosophy, due to his recognition to both matter and spirit; far from rejecting material civilization, he calls for it as the foundation supporting spiritual civilization, and he does not undervalue spiritual values but rather prioritizes them, viewing them as both the hallmark and the ultimate goal of civilization. As he puts it, "Mechanics will not find its true direction, nor will it render services within its power, unless humanity—having bowed its head toward the earth—lifts it up to gaze at the heavens." (Al-Rabie, 1980, pp. 80-81)

2- Henri Bergson's Perspective on Art:

Based on an overview of the philosophy and methodology of the French thinker Henri Bergson—which is based on intuition—his central idea was that the material world is controlled by forces known as the "élan vital" (vital impulse), and that art is founded upon intuition. This latter, in this context, is a direct grasp of reality—something the intellect cannot comprehend. Consequently, Bergson is recognized as a pioneer of this philosophical current in contemporary thought, and specifically within 20th-century aesthetics philosophy, an era marked by a multiplicity of currents, theories, and even artistic schools. As the thinker Amira Helmy Matar says: it is difficult to limit ourselves to a single perspective, because every artist and thinker has a unique vision shaped by their own distinct background, and he has the right to have a personal, subjective vision that sets him apart. This is largely due to the immense possibilities afforded by the environment, which enabled artistic expression in diverse forms, particularly with the evolution of modern and contemporary art studies that liberated art from the restriction of the Greco-Roman classical tradition that had dominated its direction for centuries. (Matar, 1998, p. 175)

If we have to select a philosophical current within contemporary philosophy, the most influential one is undoubtedly intuitionism. Then, how did this intuition philosophy emerge, and what is its stance on art? We must focus on the founder of this philosophy: Henri Bergson, known as the philosopher of duration. Bergson's stance cannot be understood in isolation; it must be viewed within the context of his philosophical system, for intuition—as the approach's guiding principle—acts as the driving force that controls, and indeed justifies, his aesthetic and artistic views. While truth is typically has to be grasped by the intellect through the external world, Bergson's philosophy sees that: "we discover within ourselves, undoubtedly, at the cost of considerable effort and exhaustion—a wholly distinct kind of truth. This truth is characterized by an intense qualitative force and is composed of elements that are utterly heterogeneous, yet so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish any single element in isolation... This inner truth has freedom; it is neither spatial nor quantifiable, it is, in essence, pure duration." (Bocheński, 1992, p. 15)

He adds about distinctness this truth from the truths of the external world that the perception of which relied on the experimental approach making it a part of

natural science— that it has acquired a new dimension that requires a different approach; whereas it was once observed externally, it is now experienced internally. This inner truth is a unique, singular, and indivisible act; it is an impulse, a jump, and a process of becoming; something that defies measurement. In principle, this truth exists in a state of continuous flow; thus, it does not merely "exist "but is in a constant state of "becoming". (Bocheński, 1992, p. 145)

Thus, the truth in Bergson's philosophy has two aspects: the first is external and shared between oneself and others, while the second one is internal, having no relation with intellect but rather attained through intuition. The first is intellectual; based on quantity and amenable to analysis, fragmentation, and prediction. The second is intuitive, based on quality and a form of intellectual empathy; the intellect cannot have the final say here, as this aspect defies analysis or the kind of description applied to external objects, nor can it be fully expressed, for language—being a construct of the intellect—is incapable of encompassing it. "World of Knowledge", National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters.

While intuition cannot be used to grasp the external world, it has the capacity to penetrate the inner realm. The distinction between the mind's outward movement and intuition's inward movement lies in the fact that the former establishes what is known as natural science because it is based grounded on the rational principle of determinism. Consequently, any knowledge of the external world derived this way lacks what Bergson calls "vital movement", that quality which connects knowledge to the self and embodies the true meaning of consciousness, because it is in feeling and duration. This form of consciousness is not something shared with others; furthermore, this inner realm is not amenable to rational analysis. Therefore, the intuitive method must be employed, as it is the only approach that aligns with the realm's experiential, feeling-based nature.

What distinguishes the primordial reality for Bergson is movement, change, evolution, and interaction, a flow that advances along a specific yet unpredictable path. Intuition is the only appropriate method for engaging with and understanding this reality; it occupies a position midway between two faculties: instinct—which operates unconsciously and is more pronounced in animals than in humans—and intellect—which is more dominant in humans than in animals. Thus, intuition is the proper means to attain knowledge of the realm of duration, where artistic activity is one of its manifestations; it is a state of uniting with the object that one perceives and seeks to understand. (Shaker, 2001, pp. 117-118) .

Returning to the subject of art and artistic experience in Bergson's philosophy, it is true that—unlike Kant—Bergson did not dedicate a specific work to clarifying his stance on the nature of art. However, by drawing upon ideas scattered throughout his writings and applying the principles of his intuitive method, we can reconstruct a Bergsonian perspective on the nature and reality of aesthetic experience, as well as how a relationship can throw the art between the artist and the recipient.

3- Laughter and Art in Bergson's Philosophy:

The study of laughter is one of the most important studies that highlighted Bergson's philosophy of art. Indeed, we find what might be termed as "philosophy of laughter" as a paramount art form, particularly in theater, where a high level of laughter signals the work's success, this perspective aligns closely with social criticism within art; it is a research about the objectives of art and the outcomes it ought to achieve, considerations that must be borne in mind during both the writing and the performance of the work.

Bergson based his theory of laughter in the contrast between the living and the inanimate, between the spiritual and the mechanical. He explained this theory in three essays, initially published in a Parisian journal and later compiled into a short book titled "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" (1900). The theory is defined by three fundamental characteristics:

First, nothing is laughable unless it is human. This implies that for the phenomenon of laughter to arise within a work of art, its subject matter must intersect with the human element; art that strays from this quality becomes dull, failing to engage the audience and remaining emotionally neutral and lifeless.

A landscape may be magnificent, sublime, or ugly, but it is never comical or funny; if we laugh at an animal, it is only because we perceive in it a human trait or expression. We might laugh at a hat, yet what amuses us is its shape that was made by a human being. Thus, if an animal or an inanimate object provokes laughter, it is due to a resemblance to a human, whether it is because of something the man install in it or what it was used for by man. Indeed, Bergson considers an absence of emotion to be one of the conditions for laughter; the comical seems to take effect only upon a mind free from emotion. (Abdel-Moati, 1985, p. 36)

Secondly, the person playing the comic role—serving as the source and focal point of the artistic work—does not perform this role for themselves but for others; therefore, an element of "indifference" must be present. Indifference is the natural environment for laughter, whereas its greatest enemy is strong emotion. It appears that laughter arises only in a calm mind, and we do not laugh at a person who evokes our pity or admiration. (Muljam, 1990, p. 92) Since the "Other" exists outside the self, its role must be a simulation directed at the intellect rather than the heart; this allows the artwork to resonate with the recipient as an emotional presence, transforming intellectual empathy into an internalized emotional sensation.

Thirdly, it must have a collective dimension. Laughter, for instance, is directly proportional to the size of the audience witnessing the object of amusement; a significant portion of the laughter does not stem from its original source—the artist—but rather from the echo of laughter produced by others. It is as if we are laughing merely because others are laughing. As Bergson states: "Laughter occurs only within a community of minds; we cannot find pleasure in comic if we feel

isolated, the laughter seems to require an echo." (Bergson, *Laughter*, 2007, p. 108). Consider the laughter of a crowd at the sight of a person running down the street that trips and falls: what makes them laugh? Had he intended to sit on the ground—and they know it—they would not have laughed; rather, they laughed because he ended up on the ground against his will and without intending to do so.

Thus, what made them laugh was not the sudden change itself, but the involuntary nature of that change—the fact that it occurred due to a lack in attention and a lack of deliberate control or physical adaptability (perhaps caused by a stone in his path that he failed to notice or upon which he lost his balance).

Bergson notes that when a person laughs at another—or at another's behavior—they are acting as a social reformer; laughter draws attention to flaws that harm society and disrupt its balance. One might laugh, for instance, at someone who is extremely thin, someone prone to forgetfulness, or someone controlled by habit to the point of acting like a machine. Bergson illustrates this with a scene featuring Charlie Chaplin in one of his silent films: Chaplin works in an automobile factory, repeatedly performing the same motion—tightening a bolt with a wrench—for an extended period. After his shift ends and he leaves the factory, the mechanical movement he had grown accustomed to continue to dominate him, making him seem more machine than human; upon meeting a female friend, he mistakes the buttons on her dress for bolts and attempts to tighten them with a wrench.

Bergson did not merely classify laughter as an innate human trait; he elucidated the noble nature and dimensions of it. Far from being an act of madness or vulgarity, laughter is a quality that connects the individual to the humanity, which is often overlooked by some. Indeed, this characterization resonates with the voice of conscience that speaks to all and the spiritual bond that extends into realms beyond our immediate perception, for laughter is not an isolated sound.

All the forms of the laughter cited by Bergson reflect an image of the human being transformed—for one reason or another—into something resembling a machine. These include:

Repetition: The recurrences of an event or the repeated actions of a person, specifically those strange coincidences that do not align with the ordinary lifestyle provoke laughter.

Inversion: This refers to a reversal of roles; an example is a scene where an accused person preaching the judge.

Interference of Series: This involves a scenario where characters at a wedding, for instance, find themselves caught up in events that shove them into a completely different context, such as a funeral gathering.

Comical words: These rely on the nature of the local language and the multiple meanings a phrase can convey.

Amazement: This is a clear manifestation of rigidity; the amazed person resembles a machine, which can be entitled by: the amazement is the dream's logic.

Action and movement: An action is intentional and conscious, whereas a movement escapes spontaneously and is mechanical.

The presence of the material alongside the spiritual: This is illustrated by the example of a German philosopher's eulogy: "He was—may God have mercy on him—a virtuous, stout man." (Bergson, Laughter, 2007, pp. 75-76-111-112)

Bergson distinguishes between tragedy and comedy in the creation of art: tragedy relies on internal observation, as the creator shapes the protagonist from the depths of their own self, whereas the creation of comedy is based on external observation, making it similar to the inductive sciences.

Bergson also addresses art forms such as caricature, which often precede reading because it is like a comprehensive article that we find ourselves—at once—laughing about —subject of art in general—. More broadly, the effect of art on us is to lull our active or rational faculties elevating us to a level of pure sensitivity where the evocative idea is realized and we empathize with the emotion expressed in the artwork. (Muljam, 1990, p. 93)

A key feature of Bergson's philosophy is the evident, close connection between the art of the comic and life in general; he ultimately viewed the art of laughter as a weapon with which the artist confronts the public and the social isolation that threatens society.

Conclusion:

These are the key philosophical ideas characterizing Bergson's theory of art, ideas inseparable from his philosophical stance, known as the intuitive approach. Consequently, there is a close connection between philosophy and art; this represents a new philosophical approach that aligns more closely with human reality and its challenges. Through it, Bergson sought to interpret artistic phenomena using philosophical intuition as a method enabling access to the depths of the self and the expression of inner life.

This philosophy belongs to a current that opposes rationalism and scientific materialism; it establishes a philosophical vision—or school of thought—that seeks harmony with the flowing stream of life, far from the abstractions of the intellect. It aims to surpass the scientific laws that were formulated to understand matter, in order to comprehend qualitative subjects (such as art).

In art, intuition acts much like the curiosity that seeks to unveil the essence of a work and dive into its depths; indeed, the essence of an artwork is the artist's intuition and what he reached, independent of any logical order. Bergson's intuition distinguishes itself from other approaches by asserting that intuition cannot attain the Absolute unless it gets rid of all forms of analysis, deconstruction, and mathematical, physical, or chemical operations. Consequently, Bergsonism

emerges as a philosophy of presence and spiritual effectiveness; by restoring focus to the human spirit and positioning it as the center of the universe, it stands as a philosophy of departure that gave a spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic jump forward.

Bergson aligns with the utilitarian-pragmatic current in its revolt against intellect, yet he emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between intellect and intuition. While the first serves as a tool of controlling the environment, it distances the artist—or the appreciative observer—from a purely utilitarian view of things; instead, he aligns their efforts with the spiritual realm, thereby fostering greater creativity. Furthermore, he disagrees with the psychoanalytic school—represented by the Austrian scholar Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)—regarding the nature of "affect" (deep inner feeling or sentiment); Bergson asserts that this sentiment is not the product of instinct, but rather the outcome of sustained rational thought and continuous intellectual contemplation, achieved by collecting scientific facts and comparing them with each another.

The Bergsonian interpretation of art—based in the concepts of intuition and duration—is limited, as it makes these concepts obscure and irreconcilable with logic and practice. The transcendental perspective that seeks to explain art through intuition largely likens it to the Platonic notion of inspiration—interpreted as an imaginary power descending from the heavens to earth (or to the human being). Consequently, an artwork born of pure contemplation and a passive intuition based on the direct perception of nature and an attitude of worship the spectacle of life, without the artist's active engagement, it is left without any purpose other than pleasure and euphoria.

Furthermore, his perspective on art is considered partial, as his theory relies on the factors of intuition and duration (the psychological dimension) while neglecting other factors. These latter elements give rise to alternative theories and interpretations, such as the role of thought (idealist interpretation), nature and imagination (Romantic interpretation), experience (pragmatic interpretation), economic factors (economic interpretation), and social factors (sociological interpretation), along the many diverse interpretations that have emerged throughout the history of both philosophical and artistic thought.

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