

CULTURE, EVENTS, SPEECH GENRES AND STORIES

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to interpret systematically M. M. Bakhtin's views on genre. Although Aristotle was the first philosopher—and one of the first thinkers in general who focused on the issues of artistic and rhetorical genres, philosophy as such did not treat these issues for a considerably long time. One of the first philosophers who approached the genre issue within the larger context of the philosophy of language was Mikhail M. Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and a literary scholar. As early as the 1920s he founded philosophical thinking on the so-called small speech genres, which later served as the basis for a remarkable theory of primary and secondary genres. Bakhtin is a world renowned theoretician on the novel, but his genre theory is nevertheless very topical, too, since it relates to issues focused on by philosophers much later.

Keywords: event, small speech genre, story, consummatedness, compositional procedures, architectural form.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, a classic representative of modern ethnology, stated repeatedly that even the worst kind of order is more acceptable for a human being than a perfect kind of chaos. Even though contemporary science (partly along with philosophy, as well) tries its best to persuade us that the world is chaos, a human being nevertheless needs to manage, control and overcome it in order to survive, as if his/her cultural naturalness included the will to transform the chaotic into the orderly, or even to prescribe the natural laws and cultural norms that the world should respect. Genres are an important means of exercising this will. Of course, when mentioning genres, we mean not only artistic ones, but genres of all kinds.

It was Aristotle who was the first philosopher to focus on the issue of genres. This classical philosopher dealt with genres in two books: *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. *Poetics*, which is nowadays undoubtedly considered to be a classic work of its kind, constitutes systematic research into tragedy, that is, research into one genre of dramatic art.¹ If the contemporary

¹ It is traditionally thought that Aristotle was also the author of the treatise on comedy. In the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris there is a collection of ancient Greek works entitled *Tractatus Coislianus* including a text on comedy. It is highly probable that its author was familiar with a now lost part of the *Poetics* by Aristotle that focuses on comedy, and that it was used as a model. However, given the doubts concerning the authorship as well as the authenticity, we will not take this text into account. Let us just mention its positive impact in provoking Umberto Eco to write an excellent novel *The Name of the Rose* about the “destiny” of the lost text on comedy by Aristotle.

reader follows Aristotle's *Poetics* carefully, (s)he will be awed to find that it provides a register of almost all the important areas of contemporary genre research. Aristotle claimed that tragedy is meant to evoke catharsis, which is reached through the interaction of fear and sympathy. If we translate this into the contemporary language of philosophy and the humanities, Aristotle actually focused on the pragmatic effects of tragedy on viewers. Furthermore, Aristotle examined the relation of tragedy and reality. He was persuaded that if history is to tell stories about events which took place or happened, and it does so even if they may seem improbable or unreal to a reader, then tragedy is to perform actions which did not happen, but could have happened (cf. Aristotle 2000, Chapter 9).

On this occasion we must mention the philosophical and literary theory of possible worlds according to which there is a world being lived, that is, the world of our life, where the course of the life of a human being is determined by natural and social laws. Besides this, there are the so-called possible worlds, alternative possible worlds with natural and social laws similar to those valid in the world currently being lived. By contrast, the events in these worlds refer to the stories formed by the discipline proper to the alternative possible worlds. These events never happened: they are fictions which, in a very simplified way mean approximately the following: these narratives construct their own world of referents. Structuralists would say that they are autonomous, that is, they refer to themselves.

If we want to understand the difference between what Aristotle says about history and tragedy, there is a useful example of history versus so-called alternative history. According to one group of historians, history is represented by historical narratives that relate real events. Historians then create narrations on the basis of more or less numerous traces left behind by real events. Paul Veyne (1984, Part Two) claims that historians create plots while the pragmatic aim of these narratives is to persuade the reader of their true character. They are to persuade the reader that they represent highly credible evidence, or even an objective reconstruction of the past. Alongside history, there is so-called alternative history creating narratives that tell of events that did not happen, but could have happened. For example, alternative history deals with what would have happened if Franz Joseph II had agreed to the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy as a federation, or what would have happened if the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler had been successful, or if Czechoslovakia had not found itself in the sphere of influence of the Communist Soviet Union after World War II, or if the course of liberalization of the so-called Prague Spring had been implemented to the extent intended... To sum up, alternative history is similar to tragedy in that it tells stories which did not happen, but might very well have happened.

When Aristotle deals with the individual parts of the tragedy, claiming that if a tragedy is to be a tragedy it must include the essential parts immanent to the tragedy as a form of art, then he actually discovers a hidden invariant: every tragedy refers to its essential parts described by Aristotle in the same way as an invariant refers to a variant. On the one hand, an invariant is abstract and a variant is concrete, on the other hand, an invariant is always richer than the individual variants as it not only covers all concrete variants, but also enables the creation of new ones. If it seems to the reader of this text that we have translated Aristotle's views into the language of structuralism, you are right. It has been our aim to interpret the master's views in a more accessible way and to draw the reader's attention to the fact that many structuralists consider *Poetics* to be the first structuralist text on art.

Moreover, *Poetics* also includes normative passages; here we might mention Aristotle's good advice for the authors of tragedies as well as his valuable ideas on comparing tragedy with comedy. We could undoubtedly find many other valuable thoughts that relate to some of the contemporary styles of thought found in the humanities. If we followed the way in which *Poetics* by Aristotle was "treated" within hermeneutics, formalism, marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, cognitivism, or neopragmatism, we would very probably come to the conclusion that each subject chooses what it can use to defend the legitimate character of the opinions expressed.

However, we have not sought to interpret in detail the text by Aristotle; we simply wished to underline the following important aspect: Aristotle was one of the first philosophers and thinkers in general to deal systematically with an artistic genre. Despite having outlined the territory of possible further genre research quite precisely, we suggest that philosophy did not focus on genre issue for long, some exceptional occasional periods of marginal interest notwithstanding. It was not until the 20th century that interest in this field of research surfaced once again. There are definitely many factors behind this interest; nevertheless we think that one of the most important was the challenge to the correspondence theory of truth mounted by one section of the philosopher community. This led to an increasing interest in those things that enable us to examine the different means of persuasion that serve to support one or another truth, genres included.

The ambition of this paper on genres is to employ the exciting findings associated with the conception (co)authored by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, which is of great interest to us. We would like to underline the fact Bakhtin was a co-author since the historical circumstances under which the basis of this conception was constructed were not at all favourable for Bakhtin; he was thus forced to publish his ideas partly under the names of his close colleagues

We will start with his *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*², which includes an interesting subchapter on our priority. Let us quote a remarkable idea:

[H]uman consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality. (...) As the plastic arts give width and depth to the visual realm and teach our eye to see, the genres of literature enrich our inner speech with new devices for the awareness and conceptualization of reality (Bakhtin 1991, 174).

This idea is brilliantly developed as follows:

It would be naive to assume that the painter sees everything first and then shapes what he saw and puts it onto the surface of his painting according to a certain technique. In real fact, seeing and representation merge. New means of representation force us to see new aspects of visible reality, but these new aspects cannot clarify or significantly enter our horizon if the new means necessary to consolidate them are lacking. One is inseparable from the other.

The same is true in literature. The artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre. A particular aspect of reality can only be understood in connection with the particular means

² The book was published for the first time in 1928, and Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev was named as the author. When its Czech translation was published in 1980, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was named as the author. The American edition from 1985 has both M. M. Bakhtin and P. N. Medvedev as the authors.

of representing it. On the other hand, the means of expression are only applicable to certain aspects of reality. The artist does not squeeze pre-made material onto the surface of the work. The surface helps him to see, understand, and select his material.

(...) In order to create a novel it is necessary to learn to see life in terms of the novelistic story [fabula], necessary to learn to see the wider and deeper relationships of life on a large scale. There is an abyss of difference between the ability to grasp the isolated unity of a chance situation and the ability to understand the unity and inner logic of a whole epoch. There is, therefore, an abyss between the anecdote and the novel (Bakhtin 1991, 174-175).

What we have just quoted leads us to the following conclusions: 1. A genre acts as a mediator between a human being and reality; it determines a person's view of reality, that is, the view is not what is seen, but the interpretation of the seen; 2. the birth of a new genre is not only the creation of a new artistic form, but also the appearance of a new perspective on reality.

We should also bear in mind that a literary genre represents a consummated whole, which we will deal with later in this paper. However, at this point we must thoroughly delineate the meaning of the notion of "genre".

In their book entitled *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929)³ M. M. Bakhtin and V. N. Voloshinov extended the scope of their research from the field of art to the whole sphere of language. This is indicated by the introduction of a new term: "small speech genre". We also find the term "small genre of life" in this text. What do these two terms signify? First of all, they signify the relatively stable forms in which communication takes place, while each of the forms is closely connected with a particular activity. A small speech genre is characterized by the thematic horizon, that is, a larger or narrower assemblage of preferred themes. At the same time, such genres can be considered the smallest kind of context within which every word acquires its particular meaning. In a society, there are many mutually differentiated small speech genres. It can be said that every social group creates its own repertoire during and for specific historical situations.

M. M. Bakhtin (1986) returned to the issue of speech genres to develop these ideas further in his manuscript called *The Problem of Speech Genres* written in 1952-1953, some of which was published in 1978 in the journal *Literaturnaja učoba*. His analysis was based on the premise that the elementary unit of communication is not the sentence, but an utterance. Every utterance is formed by a speech genre which performs the following functions: it determines the subject matter, compositional structure, and style.

According to Bakhtin

[t]he wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and

³ The author of the English translation is Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov. The Slovak translation has both V. N. Voloshinov and M. M. Bakhtin as the authors. Nowadays it is difficult to decide who the genuine author is. We can only rely on the fact that Bakhtin later returned to this issue to elaborate the details of the rough outline found in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Voloshinov (1986). As a result, we can at least assume that he had a decisive influence in formulating this original and stimulating conception of language.

becomes more complex. Special emphasis should be placed on the extreme *heterogeneity* of speech genres (oral and written). In fact, the category of speech genres should include short rejoinders of daily dialogue (and these are extremely varied depending on the subject matter, situation, and participants), everyday narration, writing (in all its various forms), the brief standard military command, the elaborate and detailed order, the fairly variegated repertoire of business documents (for the most part standard), and diverse world of commentary (in the broad sense of the word: social, political). And we must also include here the diverse forms of scientific statements and all literary genres (from the proverb to the multivolume novel) (Bakhtin 1986, 60).

We can see that what is presented here are very simple utterances along with utterances of complex composition, therefore we must—in Bakhtin’s words:

draw attention to the very significant difference between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres (understood not as a functional difference). Secondary (complex) speech genres—novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth—arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterance of others (Bakhtin 1986, 82).

Following on from what has just been quoted, it becomes important for us to underline that Bakhtin did not see a *functional* difference between primary and secondary speech genres. The true character of this statement will become clear after another notion comes into play, that of a “story”. Even though Bakhtin did not use this word, we consider its use legitimate, since in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* it is stated that a novelist must learn to see life as a novel’s *fabula*, and a *fabula* is an inevitable presupposition for existence of any story.

It is generally known that there is no culture in this world which could not tell stories. Storytelling in itself is not merely fun; it is not a luxury which one can only afford after one’s existence has been assured. Stories play an extremely important role in the life of a human being—and we can say the same about the life of the whole culture. Mark Turner even attempted to reverse the hierarchy in the relation between a language and a story in his book entitled *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (1996).

In order to understand the meaning of his theoretical gesture, let us mention an idea that represents the traditional hierarchical superiority of a natural language over a story. The author, Yuri M. Lotman, explained it systematically in his *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977, Chapter 1). He was persuaded that the primary modeling system is a natural language like Slovak, English, Russian, German, or French, etc. Above it there are secondary modeling systems such as philosophy, religion, morality, law, ideology, art (and when Lotman mentions art, he means “non-verbal” arts, too). Each of these adopts the structure or parts of the structure of a primary modeling system, so that each of the secondary modeling systems is constructed on the basis of the natural language which it enriches, with a more complex structure able to transmit an incomparably larger amount of information as a result. Many of the secondary modeling systems make storytelling possible; that is why stories

are understood as the result of the modeling activity of a certain exotic language, to use Turner's words. However, Turner is persuaded that it in fact works the other way round. In the beginning of every language there was a particular simple story—a parable, which became the basis for constructing the language. Thus, it is not that a parable is the advance creation of a literary language before natural language but rather that it precedes language altogether (Lotman 1977, Chapter 8).

To sum up, stories play an indispensable role in the life of a human being and a culture, we can state that they represent primary and often immediate forms of the interpretation of the world. They are tools of knowledge and the evaluation of a particular section of reality or even the world as a whole. It is thanks to stories that we learn about the events which took place a long time ago or that have happened recently. Stories make our interpretation of the past easier; they enable us to act adequately in the present and they create possible scenarios of the future, which can be proved by the oldest known stories, that is, myths, epics, and fairytales.

Myths narrate the creation of the world, the establishment of order in the world, the creation of the Earth's surface and the seas, the cruel fights between gods in the remote sacral past, the origin of human beings, the origin of their language and cultural tools. Epics narrate the stories of the origin of nations in the dawn of history, of heroic acts of the first rulers, of the establishment of the first countries, of the first laws and social norms, of constant fights with external and internal enemies. To this day, parents have been telling their children fairytales, that is, stories, which teach children to tell right from wrong; they teach children that each evil deed will be punished sooner or later. We can say that a story is a primary form that enables human beings to react to what happens in nature and culture. What if someone finds the shell of a sea animal on a hill hundreds of kilometers away from the sea? Its presence will be explained in the form of storytelling. What if someone witnesses an accident? Again, storytelling will take place. What if a young woman falls in love with a young man? Again, her reaction will be to tell a female friend the story of how she met a boy, how they exchanged those highly significant looks, how he held her hand, and how he kissed her for the first time. What if a politician is found guilty of causing damage to a country due to mismanagement? The politician's reaction will be to tell the journalists a story that differs entirely from that which was presented in the print or electronic media. All of us could give many other examples, since day after day, without knowing it, we all tell several stories to each other.

In everyday communication, people tell stories with the same kind of ease with which they use the vocabulary and grammar of a particular language. Umberto Eco is right to state in the "Author's Postscript" to *The Name of the Rose* (1994) that children speak their mother tongue without knowing anything about the rules of the language, despite their being able to use them correctly. On the contrary, a grammar scholar can explain why and how the children have learnt the rules of their mother tongue, and indicate which grammatical categories have been used during communication. Let us try to put ourselves in the position of a grammar scholar and explain the role Bakhtinian primary speech genres play in the creation of everyday stories and in everyday communication in general.

First of all, a genre inevitably has thematic content, the subject matter, since a story is always told about something; it always refers to particular events and people. It is not

important for us at this moment if the events in question are real or fictional, because in a way a story always creates its own objects, its own setting of time and space, as well as its characters. There is no event in a story which would be presented in its totality, and this is partly because an event has no strict limits, it is not an object with solid shapes, but an effect. And as Paul Veyne (1984), a French historian, put it aptly, we learn about events from the traces they leave behind. It is out of these traces that a historian or a writer creates stories.

However, we should be careful, as these traces cannot be considered to be facts independent of our consciousness and will. According to Veyne, the traces become facts just after they become parts of a particular plot, that is, a particular story. It is the plot or story itself that decides what can and what cannot become fact. How does this happen? In order to explain it satisfactorily, we will use the seemingly diversionary difference between a story/*fabula* and a plot/*siuzhet*. This way we will also discuss Bakhtin's second elementary function of speech genres—the compositional structure.

Many literary scholars, narratologists and aesthetes have written about the difference between story and plot (content and form, fiction and narration, *fabula* and *siuzhet*). We consider the distinction made by Tzvetan Todorov to be important. In his book *The Poetics of Prose* (1971, revised in 1978) he used the difference between the *fabula* and the *siuzhet* to analyse originally a detective novel. Todorov was persuaded that in a detective novel there are actually two stories: the first is the story of a crime which we cannot, in most cases, “observe” live. So if we do not see it, how do we learn about it? It is, of course, thanks to the traces left after the crime which are found at the crime scene by the detective and team of assistants. Their role is then to create a story out of the traces, a story which gives the traces the status of facts, and which in fact explains to the reader what actually happened. Not all the traces become the parts of the story in question, as the detective will leave out those which have no meaning in the story.

If we allow ourselves a little more freedom, we can say it all again in the language of modern semiotics. The founder of semiotics, Charles S. Peirce, was convinced that even although an object in itself shows itself as a sign, the traces have meaning only when they are perceived by somebody as signs. Umberto Eco (1984, 46), who has done much to promote Peirce's theory, claimed that a sign is not only an object standing for another object in its absence—a sign is also something that asks to be interpreted, and a story is interpretation *sui generis*.

The same traces can equally serve to create another story, different from that of the detective. The advocate will always attempt to tell a different story proving the innocence of the client. If the advocate succeeds in questioning the detective's story, the detective must create a new story as fast as possible in order to question the advocate's version. Todorov claims that the crime scene can be considered to be the *fabula* and the stories created in this case by the detective and advocate can be considered to be the *siuzhet*. It is worth remembering what Bakhtin and Medvedev (1991, 174-175) said about the novelist who must learn to see life as *fabula*, that is, a story in a state of birth. The relation between the *fabula* and the *siuzhet* can in this case be compared to the relation between real life—the real events, and a story *in statu nascendi*. On the basis of the one and only *fabula*, the one and only whole composed of traces, that is, the immediate effects of real events it is possible to narrate many stories. The kind of story we tell depends to a great extent on the chosen speech genre.

To be complete, we must mention the third elementary function of speech genres according to Bakhtin, that of style. Although style is not that important for a real detective, it is not to be forgotten either. The one and the same story can be told in a boring or in an attractive way, it can be impersonal or it can have a noticeable authorial signature. It can be presented in a tragic or a comic tone. In everyday life, these differences are not so visible, the stories in the police files are more or less impersonal, but as soon as crimes—real or fictional—become subject matter for literary works, the question of style becomes of great importance: let us give one example *pars pro toto*, the legendary stories of a detective called Hercule Poirot.

Literature has been exemplified as if naturally, which is symptomatic of the shift from primary speech genres to secondary ones. As we already know, the secondary speech genres digest various primary speech genres and transform them in a complex way, which results in a complex structured utterance like a novel. It was precisely Bakhtin's theory of the novel which prompted Julia Kristeva to formulate her influential theory of intertextuality. However, this theory is not of concern to us at this moment since we feel that to recall its basic theses would serve us no real purpose. We would do better to concentrate on another aspect of a literary text, that of consummatedness.

Genre in art—and from now on literature, which will represent art for us—presents a consummated artistic utterance. If we want to understand what Bakhtin meant by consummatedness, we must refer to his early work entitled *The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art* (1924). A simple utterance formed by a particular small speech genre is unconsummated in principle since it reacts to another utterance. It can argue with this other utterance, it can refute it or it can reply to it, as well as agree with it, confirm it, and even use it as a support. An utterance is a repartee to the preceding one, and it induces in itself a new utterance. Similarly, a scholarly text cannot be considered consummated since the process of knowledge is never-ending according to Bakhtin. A particular scholarly text articulates the state of knowledge which is reached at a certain moment of time and in a certain cultural context, it connects to preceding theories, it develops, corrects and enriches them, it formulates new hypotheses, which can be confirmed as well as questioned and dismissed by the ensuing process of knowledge. It would however be hasty to claim that something similar to the Bakhtinian genres is not present in scholarly knowledge. It is, and in order to support our statement we will use the views of Michel Foucault. In his work entitled *The Archeology of Knowledge* (2002) he tried to formulate the principles and rules of the examination of discourses, the discursive practices that condition the creation of concrete propositions of a certain kind. According to Foucault, discursive practices take part in the formation of objects, modalities of utterances, notions and strategies. John Frow stated the following about these formative actors: "Discourses—by which Foucault here means something very close to what I call genres—are performative structure that shape the world in the very process of putting it into speech" (Frow 2005, 18). According to Foucault, individual discourses not only differ from each other by their objects, but also by creating objects about which they utter. Discursive practices therefore function as the discipline determining what can and what cannot be(come) an object of utterance. As for discipline in practice, Foucault exemplified it in "The Order of Discourse":

People have often wondered how the botanists or biologists of the nineteenth century managed not to see that what Mendel was saying was true. But it was because Mendel was speaking of objects, applying methods, and placing himself on a theoretical horizon, which were alien to

the biology of his time. Naudin, before him, had of course posited the thesis that hereditary traits are discrete; yet, no matter how new or strange this principle was, it was able to fit into the discourse of biology, at least as an enigma. What Mendel did was to constitute the hereditary trait as an absolutely new biological object, thanks to a kind of filtering which had never been used before: he detached the trait from the species, and from the sex which transmits it; the field in which he observed it being the infinitely open series of the generations, where it appears and disappears according to statistical regularities. This was a new object which called for new conceptual instruments and new theoretical formulations. Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not 'within the true' of the biological discourse of his time: it was not according to such rules that biological objects and concepts were formed. It needed a complete change of scale, the deployment of a whole new range of objects in biology for Mendel to enter into the true and for his propositions to appear (in large measure) correct. Mendel was a true monster, which meant that science could not speak of him; whereas about thirty years earlier, at the height of the nineteenth century, Scheiden, for example, who denied plant sexuality, but in accordance with the rules of biological discourse, was merely formulating a disciplined error (Foucault 1981, 60-61).

Admitting a great amount of freedom we could say that Scheiden formed his proposition within the valid genre rules, that is, discourse practices, while Mendel formed his proposition outside the valid genre rules/discourse practices. Or we could even interpret it as Mendel trying to form prerequisites to the creation of new genres and discourses in the territory of "wild exteriority", to put it in Foucaultian terms.

We have already said that a literary utterance differs from an utterance formed by a small speech genre or by discursive practices by its consummatedness. This means that besides its composition, that is, its structure, which implements an aesthetic object, it disposes of the architectural form implemented by the compositional procedures. We can for instance say that a drama as such is considered to be a compositional form, but the tragic and the comic represent the architectural forms of consummatedness. In order to understand this better, we can say that the acting of different characters can be depicted in a comic or a heroic way. The acting can result in laughter or respect. Something similar was claimed a couple of years after Bakhtin, by J.-F. Lyotard in *The Différend* (1988) in which he devoted a separate section to the issue of discursive genres. Discursive genres ensure the succession of various sentences and, most importantly, at the same time they subordinate the sentences to the final purpose which we want to achieve through a particular chosen genre. Once we replace the expression of "final purpose" with the Bakhtinian term of "consummatedness", we have actually realized the final purpose in the field of literature.

It is high time for us to try to formulate a conclusion. We are persuaded that Bakhtin's hard work developed together with that of Medvedev and Voloshinov is more than inspiring. They formulated the issue of genres in a much larger way than simply looking at it as a problem of certain procedures and stable forms in which utterances of different kinds are moulded. In fact, they attempted to show how genres work in relation to reality, how they determine our view of reality or our expression of it. Moreover, we also consider their willingness to deal with the issue of the consummatedness of a literary text to be important, because it is exactly this issue which enables us to understand the pragmatic effects. To put it in a different way, dealing with speech or discursive genres, examining literary genres without taking concrete pragmatic purposes into account is unproductive in its origin, and

as such it prevents us in principle from understanding not only the specific character of literature as art, but also from grasping the meaning of literary storytelling: this kind of storytelling tells us the most about the culture of its origin, which it mutually creates, that is why it is of such great importance. The directions have just been given, so we can start our journey which will be neither short nor simple, since knowledge has never followed any other path. It seems anyway that this is unlikely to change in the future.⁴

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