Note about the Notes

These notes were written for an informal philosophy of art reading group I lead from January to May 2014 that discussed various definitions of art in the analytic tradition. All notes and any extraneous commentary are of my own, unless otherwise stated; obviously none of this is original research. If I’ve missed something important, gotten something wrong (grammatically, or something more substantive), or if the reader has any suggestions for improvement, feel free to get in touch with me at the email address above.

Contents

1 Morris Weitz 2
   1.1 The Role of Theory in Aesthetics ........................................... 2

2 Stephen Davies 3
   2.1 Weitz’s Anti-Essentialism .................................................... 3

3 Arthur Danto 5
   3.1 Works of Art and Mere Real Things ....................................... 5

4 Nelson Goodman 7
   4.1 When Is Art? ............................................................................. 7

5 George Dickie 10
   5.1 The Institutional Theory of Art ................................................ 10

6 Christy Mag Uidhir & P.D. Magnus 14
   6.1 Art Concept Pluralism .............................................................. 14

7 References 19
1 Morris Weitz

1.1 The Role of Theory in Aesthetics

- Is a true definition, or joint set of necessary and sufficient conditions, possible to provide for the common noun “Art”? Morris Weitz says no. In defending this response, he first points to the lack of progress previous definitions of art have made. As it turns out, many of our previous definitions are legislative, or prescriptive, rather than properly descriptive, and therefore fail to accurately define anything.

- Weitz argues that the reason so many of our previous definitions are inadequate is because they are all grounded on a fundamental misconception of art. In other words, Weitz’s thinks we have misunderstood the “logic” of art, that is, art resists definition; it is logically impossible to provide a joint set of necessary and sufficient conditions for art.

- Weitz gives us a tour of previous definitions that have been put forth, all of which have failed in various ways. They are: Formalist theory (Bell and Fry); Emotionalist theory (Tolstoy, Ducasse); Intuitionist theory (Croce); Organicist theory (A.C. Bradley, Weitz); Voluntarist theory (Parker).

- Instead of asking “What is art?” Weitz proposes that we ask “What sort of concept is art?”

- According to Weitz, there is no common property to art. Art is an “open concept,” contra to logic or mathematics which are considered “closed concepts.” We call a concept “open” if its “conditions of application are emendable and corrigible; i.e., if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept and invent a new one to deal with the new case and its new property.” A concept is “closed” if we can state the necessary and sufficient conditions for it, but again “this can happen only in logic or mathematics where concepts are constructed and completely defined.” Art falls under “empirically-descriptive,” “normative” concepts, and unless “we arbitrarily close them by stipulating the rangers of their uses” open concepts resist real definition. (p. 412)

- Weitz compares the project of defining art to Wittgenstein’s theory of “games”: “But the basic resemblance between these concepts is their open texture. In elucidating them, certain (paradigm) cases can be given, about which there can be no question as to their being correctly described as “art” or “game,” but no exhaustive set of cases can be given.” This leads into Wittgenstein’s family resemblance theory (Philosophical
which Weitz borrows as a model for logically describing art, and recommends that we should abandon the definitionalist project, and adopt the resemblance approach instead (p. 412). Here is Wittgenstein on the resemblance theory himself: “For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 66).

- Weitz turns our attention now to sub-art concepts. He doesn’t want to say that all sub-art concepts are open. Here he asks us to consider the difference between “tragedy” and “Greek tragedy”. The first, he says, is open and must remain open, “so to allow for the possibility of new conditions, e.g., a play in which the hero is not noble or fallen or in which there is no hero but other elements that are like those of plays we already call “tragedy.” The second, however, is closed because the word “Greek” draws a boundary, namely that its conditions can be met within a narrower scope, i.e., properties which fall under the word “Greek.” Weitz goes on arguing that questions over whether X is a novel or a diary, collage or painting, or sculpture or painting do not rest on a factual ‘yes’ or ‘no’ report.

- Art is both descriptive and evaluative. Evaluative use of art: “This a work of art.” Evaluative criterion is converted into a criterion of recognition based on implication.

### 2 Stephen Davies

#### 2.1 Weitz’s Anti-Essentialism

- Many of our art theories either definitionally overgenerate or undergenerate.

- No property is jointly necessary and sufficient for something’s being an artwork.

- Weitz holds artifactuality as being a necessary condition for an artwork. However, Davies notes that a piece of Driftwood (recall the Driftwood example in Weitz’s original paper) can be removed from the beach, and presented as an artwork, *without* it also being an artifact.

- Davies introduces Weitz as an Anti-Essentialist, a philosophical position that believes the concept of art to be antithetical to definition. The general argument for Anti-Essentialists is founded on the idea that “...we can make identifying references to art while lacking knowledge of its defining essence (if it has one!)” so therefore art is a concept which remains undefinable. A definition is simply unnecessary (Motherstill 1961,
Tilghman 1989). Davies also notes various followers of Weitz: Haig Khatchadourian (1961, 1969); Arnold Berleant (1964); Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz (1971). He also notes others who have argued similarly to Weitz: WB Gallie (1948, 1956b); John Passmore (1951); Paul Ziff (1953); William Kennick (1958).

- Many have challenged Weitz’s driftwood example, arguing either that a) the piece of driftwood is not art, or that b) it is *artifactualized* in the course of it attaining art status. (p. 11)

- Davies criticizes Weitz’s Wittgensteinian family resemblance alternative: “The recognition of a resemblance among family members presupposes, and does not explain, the basis for that membership.” Furthermore: “Anything might resemble any other thing in some respect.” (p. 11).

- Enter George Dickie, who basically argues that family resemblance could never explain how the *very first* artwork qualified as an official artwork. Davies sums up Dickie’s argument like this: “A recursive definition in terms of resemblance (X is an artwork if it resembles the artworks of the past) is incomplete unless a different account of the art status of the earliest pieces is included (and the first artworks were artworks—or can be seen, retrospectively, as artworks—because...)” (p. 13). Davies finds Dickie’s question fairly posed, but quickly points out that Dickie’s line of analyses resembles a “which came first, the chicken, or the egg?” causality dilemma.

- Davies finds defenders of Weitz’s theses, i.e., “that art works are against all rules” unconvincing (p. 19, last paragraph). Davies leads up to this by making some great criticisms of rules and rule following on pp. 16-18.

- Davies criticizes Weitz’s open concept thesis, arguing that it yields two cases for serious consideration.

  1. It indicates the epistemic difficulty we have in deciding just where the boundary of the concept lies.

  2. Borderline vagueness is ontological, the way the concept is instantiated in the world and not simply a reflection of the uncertain basis of our knowledge of the world.

- “An adequate, essential definition of the concept will record the limits of the area in which the application of the term is equivocal.” (p. 20).
3 Arthur Danto

3.1 Works of Art and Mere Real Things

- Danto begins by introducing a fictional exhibition he has curated which includes all red squares and one artifact (which is also red). He then introduces a fictional artist “J” who paints a red, rectangular work nearly identical to the ones in his (Danto’s) exhibition, and demands Danto include it, which he does. J calls his work “Untitled.”

- “It cannot be simply because J is an artist, for not everything touched by an artist turns to art.” (p. 3)

- “A fence painted by J is only a painted fence.” (p. 3)

- Danto argues that the institutional theory of art is inadequate. While it might explain why Duchamp’s fountain was elevated from a “mere thing” to an artwork, it fails to explain why it received this promotion in the first place, i.e., why other urinals weren’t elevated to the status of artworks.

- The Picasso reference: “This may have been just the same sort of effort at defeating a definition that prompted Diogenes to offer a plucked chicken as a counter instance to the definition of a man as a featherless biped, and, as an act of artistic criticism, it foreshadowed a parallel move of Picasso’s, who once pasted the label from a bottle of Suze onto a drawing of a bottle, implying that there was little point in approximating to a reality by arduous academic exercise when we could just coopt fragments of reality and incorporate them into our works, immediately achieving what the best academic hand could only aspire to.” (p. 8)

- The Rauschenberg reference: Artist Robert Rauschenberg himself: “Painting relates to both art and life (I try to work in that gap between the two.)” Danto’s comments: “Perhaps it is not altogether an accident that Rauschenberg should once have exhibited a bed, as though, like philosophy according to Whitehead, art were but a collection of footnotes to Plato: a bed, to be sure, which nobody could sleep in, since it was attached upright to a wall and smeared with paint.” (p. 12)

- Up to this point Danto has spent quite a bit of time scrutinizing resemblance theories of art which he eventually acknowledges (and justifies) here: “My motive for scrutinizing this ancient theory is that the gap between imitation and reality may be a more perspicuous way of appreciating the gap between art and life. It would be an impressive strategy if both turned out to exemplify the same sort of gap.” (p. 13)
• J’s bed imitates nothing—it’s just a bed.

• Danto on George Dickie’s “The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude”: “For this reason, then, I rather applaud the polemic of George Dickie, who contests what he speaks of as “the myth of psychic distance” and says that what prevents us from attempting to intervene in actions we see on stage is not due to some mysterious sort of attitude, but to the fact that we know how to look at play: we have mastered the conventions of theater. For knowing that it is taking place in a theater is enough to assure us that “it is not really happening.” (p. 23)

• “A doctor I know jogs to his train every morning and, because he wears ordinary clothes and carries a medical bag, is invariably offered rides; this would not occur were he in jogger’s garb—joggers themselves not running to anything, merely running—...” (p. 24)

• Near the end of the chapter, Danto puts forth three questions that neatly summarize the entirety of his essay. (These are taken straight from out of the text on pp. 28-29)

  1. What is to distinguish an object that happens to be discontinuous with reality as thus far defined by an audience from just a new piece of reality? And is every new piece of reality—a new species, say, or a new invention—to be considered a contribution to art?

  2. What about J’s objects, such as his plain old bed, similar to all the beds his contemporaries sleep in (no fancy surrealistic embellishments, no superogatory paint, just plain bedness)? So that with these these there is nothing to distinguish them, no discontinuity with reality since none can be marked, and hence the novelty cannot be located where this theory seeks to locate it.

  3. Finally the conventions of theatricality supposed constant, it must now seem that anything which appears within the brackets they provide, whether or not it imitates reality, whether it is continuous or discontinuous with life, merely in consequence of occurring within brackets, it art. But then being a work of art must seem to have as little to of with any intrinsic features of the object so classed as with the conventions through which it first gets to be a work of art. Then the program of mimesis and the program of countermimesis projected by Nietzsche are each of them irrelevant to the essence of art. This appears to leave us only with the institutional framework: just as someone is a husband by virtue of satisfying certain institutionally defined conditions, though he may outwardly appear no different from any other man, so something is an artwork if it satisfies certain institutionally defined conditions, though outwardly it may appear no different from an object that is not an artwork, as in the case of J’s
bed. But this puts us back where we started, and clarity on the nature of the boundary evades us still.

• Another major question Danto puts forth involves the role convention plays in dictating the definition of art: “So far all we have are the “conventions,” within the space defined by which this dialectical comedy has been allowed to play itself out. This suggests the natural next answer, that the difference between art and reality is just a matter of those conventions, and that whatever convention allows to be an artwork is an artwork.” (p. 31)

• The argument for convention doesn’t bother Danto for too long, and he eventually dismisses it as shallow: “is a work of art” is an honorific predicate, and though honors are qualified via certain conventions, they are “earned, and the question is what entitles something to this honor: is there not something which must first be present before the honor relevantly descends?” He goes on, “And what about defeating conditions? Are there not at least some facts such that, if we knew those facts, the object of which they were true would be disqualified as an artwork no matter what anyone says?” (p. 31).

4 Nelson Goodman

4.1 When Is Art?

• Goodman begins his discussion by turning our attention to the ways in which we discern and classify symbolic artworks and nonsymbolic artworks. So for example, artworks that feature symbolic representation, could be Bosch’s Garden of Delight or Dali’s drooping watches. Artworks which are not symbolic, could include still-lifes, portraits, and landscapes “...where the subjects are rendered in a straightforward way without arcane allusions and so not themselves stand as symbols” but also purely abstract, non-representational works.

• In the next few pages Goodman hones in on abstract, non-representational works, specifically attacking the formalist doctrine many art critics and artist’s, of the time, adopted and advocated. “What matters very much, though, according to many contemporary artists and critics, is to isolate the work of art as such from whatever it symbolizes or refers to in any way.” (p. 59). Wikipedia offers an adequate definition of formalism in art: “...the study of art by analyzing and comparing form and style—the way objects are made and their purely visual aspects. In painting formalism emphasizes compositional elements such as color, line, shape and texture rather than iconography
or the historical and social context. At its extreme, formalism in art history posits that *everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within the work of art*. The context for the work, including the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist, is considered to be of secondary importance.” (My italics.)

- Goodman recognizes a crucial problem in formalism, and wants to reject it, but also realizes a problem in rejecting it: “If we accept this doctrine of the formalist or purist, we seem to be saying that the content of such works...doesn’t really matter....If we reject the doctrine, we seem to be holding that what counts is not just what a work is but lots of things it isn’t.” (p. 60)

- Goodman’s steps towards a solution begin with the question “But is what a symbol symbolizes always external to it?” Here he argues that this doesn’t hold for all kinds of symbols, and offers up four examples. I’ll list two here (taken straight from the text):
  
  (a) “the string of words”, which stands for itself;
  
  (c) “short”, which applies to itself and some other words and many other things;

- Goodman starts his argument by observing that non-representational works, for example, abstract painting, which supposedly is intended to represent nothing “may express, and so symbolize, a feeling or other quality,...” (p. 61) He then criticizes the logic behind formalism: “For a work to be an instance of ‘pure art’, of art without symbols, it must on this view neither represent nor express more even be representation or expressive. But is that enough? Granted, such a work does not stand for anything outside it; all it has are its own properties. But of course if we put it that way, all the properties any picture or anything else has—even such a property as that of representing a given person—are properties of the picture, not properties outside it.” (My italics.) Non-representational artworks, according to Goodman, aren’t free of extrinsic properties.

- Goodman starts crunching into the details, arguing that if the colors an shapes of a formalist work are to be considered internal, why should they not also be counted as external as well? For colors and shapes are “are shared by other objects but also relates the object to others having the same or different colors or shapes.” (p. 62)

- Here Goodman moves on to two scenarios involving ”samples” which put his arguments to work. For sake of space I will not summarize them here, but these ”samples” scenarios can be found on pp. 63-64. The purpose of the scenarios is to draw out the point that a sample, like that of a textile swatch, reveals “some of its properties but
not others” and that this varies with circumstance, and “can only be distinguished as those properties that is serves, under the given circumstances, as a sample of.” He compares this relationship to that of being a friend: “...my friends are not distinguished by any single identifiable property or cluster of properties, but only by standing, for a period of time, in the relationship of friendship with me.” Thus, the purest painting symbolizes something even if the artist behind it claims that it doesn’t.

- Finally Goodman transitions into addressing the question his chapter is titled: ”when is art.” He notes that the question “What is art?” is often confused with the question “What is good art?” The literature of aesthetics is full of attempts at trying to answer these questions, Goodman however, thinks that none of these answers carry conviction (for others as well, at that). Goodman simply thinks this is the wrong question to ask. The real question is not “What objects are (permanently) works of art?” but “When is an object a work of art?”

- Goodman answers his question: “…just as object may be a symbol—for instance, a sample—at certain times and under certain circumstances and not at others, so an object may be a work of art at some times and not at others.” (p. 67)

- Goodman seems to be trying to say that an object’s status as an artwork is in flux, in flux according to when it is ascribed symbolic value as an artwork. He notes that a Rembrandt painting may be a work of art now, but it very well could, exist outside of this status, as a replacement window, or a blanket. He also carefully notes that for something to function as a symbol is not a necessary condition for something to function as an artwork.

- He gives five symptoms of the aesthetic, importantly adding that these symptoms provide no definition, “much less a full bleded description or a celebration.” Furthermore, that “Symptoms, after all, are but clues; the patient may have the symptoms without the disease...” and vice versa. Here they are (pp. 67-68):

  1. Syntactic Density
  2. Semantic Density
  3. Relative Repleteness
  4. Exemplification
  5. Multiple and Complex Reference
• Goodman believes the answer to the question of “When is art?” has to be situated in terms of its symbolic function: “A salient feature of symbolization, I have urged, is that it may come and go. An object may symbolize different things at different times.”

• And in conclusion: “How an object or event functions as a work explains how, through certain modes of reference, what so functions may contribute to a vision of—and to the making of—a world.” (p. 70)

5 George Dickie

5.1 The Institutional Theory of Art

• George Dickie has, on four separate occasions, tried to formulate a definition of art. His first version was given in 1969, two revisions were made in 1971 and 1979, and in 1984 the theory was subjected to a “major overhaul.”

• Earlier definition of the theory (1969;1971;1979): “A work of art in the descriptive sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.”

• 1971’s reformulation: “A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.”

• 1974’s reformulation: “A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world).”

• Dickie notes that Richard Wollheim’s 1987 book Painting as an Art ridicules Dickie’s early version of the institutional theory. Here is Wollheim criticizing Dickie: “Does the art-world really nominate representatives? If it does, when, where, and how, do these nominations take place? Do the representatives, if they exist, pass in review all candidates for the status of art, and do they then, while conferring this status on some, deny it to others? What record is kept of these conferrals, and is the status itself subject to revision? If so, at what intervals, how, and by whom? And, last but not least, Is there really such a thing as the art-world, with the coherence of a social group, capable of having representatives, who are in turn capable of carrying out acts that society is bound to endorse?”
• Dickie argues that Wollheim has grossly misinterpreted him. And unfortunately for Dickie, this misinterpretation has been carried outward (Arthur Danto even working under Wollheim’s misinterpretation).

• Dickie continues to go on about the misinterpretation of the early version of his theory (pp. 94-96).

• Dickie clears up some misunderstandings surrounding his theory, speaking specifically towards group conferral over the status of candidate for appreciation: “I had in mind, not the whole artworld or a group of its nominated representatives, but a group that makes a movie, puts on a play, or the like.”

• Dickie’s fourth attempt includes five definitions which he regards as being representative to the core of the institutional theory of art. Here they are (straight from the text):

1. An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art.

2. A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.

3. A public is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them.

4. The artworld is the totality of all artworld systems.

5. An artworld is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.

• In all formulations of his institutional theory, Dickie has tried to organize the expression “work of art” into “descriptive” and “classificatory” senses. Importantly, Dickie remarks how his definition has always sought to be value-neutral. “I believe this is necessary because we sometimes speak of bad art and worthless art. If works of art redefined as necessarily valuable, it would make it difficult or impossible to speak of bad or worthless art.” (p. 97).

• Speaking to the evaluative use of the expression “work of art” Dickie does “not deny that expression...can be used in an evaluative way,” rather his definition is “supposed to capture a basic, non evaluative sense of the expression, which of course includes all works of art to which the evaluative sense applies as well as all the mediocre and bad works.” (p. 97).
• Here Dickie addresses that his institutional theory is a reaction to the open-concept, anti-essentialist view of art. His theory claims that “...if we stop looking for exhibited (easily noticed) characteristics of artworks...and instead look for characteristics that artworks have as a result of their relation to their cultural context, then we can find defining properties.” (p. 97).

• Double artifacts. What are these? Dickie offers two examples: Duchamp’s *Fountain* and ordinary paintings. *Fountain* is a double artifact because a urinal is a plumbing artifact, and an artwork is an artistic artifact. Ordinary paintings are double artifacts too because painting materials (like paints, canvas, wood frames, etc.) are considered manufactured artifacts. This + the actual painting—which is an artistic artifact—makes it a double artifact.

• Now Dickie moves on to explicating the *later version* of his institutional theory of art. Dickie’s own five definitions listed above are his target, which he unpacks one-by-one. These crucial explanations can be found on pages 98-102. (For sake of space I have not included them here.)

• Two recent criticisms of the institutional theory include attacks from Noel Carroll and Stephen Davies.

  **Carroll’s attack:** The institutional theory is circular and says nothing specific about art. “...Dickie has not really told us anything about art *qua* art...” (p. 103).

  **Davies’s attack:** The institutional theory lacks the one necessary ingredient of institutionalism: the conferring of the status of art. (p. 103).

• Dickie defends himself against Carroll’s criticism by arguing that he never was attempting any “real definition” of art. He goes on: “...I went beyond the exhibited characteristics of artworks in looking for necessary and sufficient conditions, which violates the definitional rules as conceived of by Morris Weitz and others.” (p. 103). Dickie always was seeking *relational characteristics* of art, rather than *exhibited characteristics* used by traditional theories because he always found the latter to be hopeless. Furthermore, Dickie has explicitly noted the circularity in both versions of his theory. His view is this: “...the necessary and sufficient conditions specified in the institutional theory cannot be understood independently of the institution of art—an institution that is imbibed from early childhood.” (p. 103).

  Notice also that in critiquing Dickie’s theory, Carroll presents his historical/narrational account of identifying art, which is to be understood not as theory, or definition of art.
Dickie has no problem with this, but makes it a point to say that Carroll’s historical/narrative framework is made up of the central notions of Dickie’s own institutional theory. Dickie argues that his institutional theory “...despite its circularity, tells us all that we need to know about how to identify artworks.” (p. 104).

- Dickie now defends himself against Davies’s criticism. Dickie’s argues that Davies’s position, namely that art is created by an exercise of authority, is unfounded, and furthermore that Davies’s never gives any argument in support of his claim. Dickies goes on: “I think Davies has confused the notion of being in a position to do something because one is possessed of authority with the notion of being in a position to do something for other reasons.” (p. 106). Dickie also mentions Ira Newman, who in her review of Davies’s book *Definitions of Art* she makes a point similar to Dickie’s: “By invoking the notion of authority and roles, Davies has a political or organizational structure in mind....So Davies’ notion [of authority] has to be viewed as, at best, metaphorical: that is, it is as if the members of the artworld conferred art status the way ministers and judges do....” (p. 106).

- Dickie now moves on to examining the classification of theories of art, proposed by Stephen Davies, which organizes art theories into either: functional, procedural, or historical categories. Some theories can of course fall into more than category. Definitions of each are below.

  - **Functionalism:** Defines art in terms of something taken to be an essential function of art (E.g., expression of emotion).
  - **Proceduralism:** Defines art in terms of some procedure (E.g., Dickie’s institutional theory).
  - **Historical:** Defines art in terms of some historical relation (E.g., Jerrold Levinson’s theory).

- Dickie now proposes another way to classify theories of art. He wants to make a distinction between natural-kind activities and cultural-kind activities. Seeking food, eating, mating, and so on, fall under the former, while seeking food using certain techniques or eating in ritualized ways fall under the latter. “Cultural-kind activities are sometimes ways of carrying on natural-kind activities.” (p. 107).

- Concluding, Dickie remarks: “The institutional theory of art is a clear example of a cultural-kind activity theory; on this theory, art is a cultural invention. Art may involve natural-kind activities such as the appreciation of basic aesthetic qualities, but the institutional theory does not see such appreciation as essential to art.” (p. 107).
6 Christy Mag Uidhir & P.D. Magnus

6.1 Art Concept Pluralism

- Christy Mag Uidhir and P.D. Magnus re-introduce us to a topic that much of philosophy of art is concerned with: is it possible to define Art? They overview the two positions philosophers often take in regards to the question, that is, Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism. The former thinks defining what Art is, is possible to elucidate, while the latter simply denies this possibility.

- Both positions, as Mag Uidhir and Magnus (henceforth u&m) point out, share some common ground: both theories impart a concept monism. u&m go on to argue that both essentialists and anti-essentialists “agree that there can be only one proper ART concept, they simply diverge with regard to its structure.” u&m believe this assumed concept monism is fatal to our theories of art. u&m instead propose that a productive way to skirt these issues is to adopt a responsible form of pluralism—similar to species concept pluralism found in philosophy of biology.

- The definitional project of art entails the following (taken straight from the text):

  1. An account of the nature of art in terms of a real definition: a thing is art if and only if it is \( F \), where \( F \) is a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.

  2. This account is arrived at via conceptual analysis chiefly underwritten by the classical theory of concepts (concepts as definitions).

  3. There is exactly one ART concept, namely a definitionally structured concept for which \( F \) exhausts the application conditions.

- u&m consider three major problems the definitional project faces, i.e. the extension problem, the definitional complexity problem, and the concept problem. I summarize these three problems below.

  * **Extension Problem:** The efforts of the essentialist project are quickly extinguished when the plurality of art is evoked. As there are a plethora of art forms in the world (e.g., conceptual art, outsider art, pure music, religious/cultural artifacts, etc.) the essentialist project’s extensional reach is limited, unable to provide a definition that can accommodate any of the above (and more!) art forms.

  * **Definitional Complexity Problem:** Capturing the plurality of art creates definitions which are often “dangerously complex, borderline arbitrary, or circular.” Basically, u&m argue that no definition of art has yet proven to be coherent and plausible.
**Concept Problem:** The historically dominant view within philosophy—the classical theory of concepts—that concepts are definitions is, as U&M point out, false according to contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science (Fodor, et al. 1999). This isn’t to say that all concepts do not have definitional structures, e.g., “odd number” is a mathematical concept and its definitional extension is somewhat clear. Here U&M note that the concept problem isn’t “necessarily fatal to the monist definitionalist project.” But, if our monist definition of art cannot provide a clear, non-convoluted, extensional definition, this, as U&M argues, is an indication that the classical theory simply isn’t working.

- How do non-definitional, or anti-essentialists approach the problem? Anti-essentialist, non-definitional attempts employ some form of Wittgensteinian family resemblance, or cluster theory (similar to Weitz). U&M take their prominent features to be of the following (taking straight from the text):
  1. The claim that (necessarily) there is no F such that: art if and only if F.
  2. This is arrived at via conceptual analysis chiefly underwritten by a prototype/exemplar/cluster theory of concepts.
  3. There is exactly one ART concept, namely a prototype/exemplar/cluster concept, the application of which involves neither necessary nor sufficient conditions (or at least no individually necessary conditions).

- There are two problems that the non-definitional project faces. I summarize these two problems below.

  **Necessity Problem:** Non-definitional accounts acknowledge the plurality of art forms and therefore attempt to extensionally accommodate these pluralistic features, by refusing to provide a monistic, singular definition. In doing this, U&M point out that non-definitionalists deny “that there are any individually necessary conditions for something’s being art (and thereby for the application conditions for ART.” This is crucial, because, as U&M argue, something being art requires intentionality, and being the product of that intentional action. This is the one necessary condition for something being art, it seems. “If there is one true ART concept, then being the product of intentional action must be constitutive of its application.” For example, even one defense of the non-definitional project posits art to involve, or be the product of, “action” (Gaut 2000, 2005).

  **Concept Problem:** If the definitional project first involves establishing the minimum requirements for our ART concept, non-definitionalists concern themselves first
with extensions of art. Reacting to the definitionalist’s extensionally-inadequate account of art, non-definitionalist appeal to some form of prototype theory, which more generously accommodates the plurality of art. Thus, U&M argue that non-definitionalist end up relying on a theory of concepts that is wholly problematic. Why though, is prototype theory so contentious? Prototype theory (Rosch 1973, Smith and Medin 1981, Ramsay 1992) advances the thesis that concept application is a matter of statistics concerning features held by extensional members, rather than entailment. Concept composition, and thus compositionality, is as U&M posit here, are integral for concept productivity. Because prototype theory seems to have a “toxic” relationship to concept composition, concepts “cannot be structured as indicated by prototype theory (Rey 1983, Fodor 1998).”

• U&M spell out why definitional and non-definitional accounts cannot be counted as pluralistic. For example, a disjunctive definition “still specifies a single concept, and so it cannot capture different seances of ‘art’ or equivocal use of the term.” Either way you have it, both camps rely on some form of concept monism. Enter ART concept pluralism. U&M spend a few sentences defending the degree to which pluralism can be responsible and not over-generating in scope.

• Appropriating the well-developed, species concept pluralism, from philosophy of biology, U&M set out to introduce a general pluralistic art model.

• Distinct SPECIES concepts are used in the biological sciences, where one concept is not expected to do all of the conceptual work. Different objects of enquiry, such as the type of organisms begin studied, while entail employment of the appropriate concept. U&M note that there are three general SPECIES concepts in use. Very briefly, I will sketch these out below.

**Phenetnic Species:** Species are divided based on the exhibited characteristics of an organism. Distinguishing properties may be chemical or molecular. Every organism, in the Phenetnic Species concept can be included in some species. Exhibited features allow Phenetnic Species theorists to identify and arrange organisms into named groups. The drawback of Phenetnic Species: “After Darwin, however, we think that evolution and history of descent are crucial to species. This is entirely overlooked by phenetnic species.”

**Biological Species:** Formulated in a variety of ways, the standard account of Biological Species “distinguishes a species as a reproductively-isolated, interbreeding group.” This, however, has limitations, and won’t hold up in “all of the contexts where biologists would talk of species.” U&M note that Biological Species either, do
not include asexual organisms as species at all, or each individual organism is its own. (U&M cite a few more limitations which I will not overview here.) The Biological Species concept, for the pluralist, does a lot of work, just not in all domains.

Phylogenetic Species: A species is distinguished by the “smallest group of common descent that could be subject to evolution and natural selection.” Phylogenetic Species relies on the details of evolution, and thus is aimed at explicating, and uncovering, the evolutionary relationships between various organisms. Because of this, however, U&M remark that these features make it hard in practice to be applicable. They go on “An organism’s ancestry is not an observable property of it, so classification depends on auxiliary hypothesis about natural history.” So basically once more discoveries are made and more knowledge is accrued, the auxiliary hypotheses must change—our classification as well. Thus, there is no stable taxonomy in the Phylogenetic Species concept, only the tracking of evolutionary lineage. The drawback however is this: Phylogeny cannot provide us with a precise way of a large group is distinguished, or counted as a species (Ereshefsky 2001). Genus, species, and subspecies aren’t distinguished, “[a]rbitrarily specified [by] fineness of grain.” U&M note that Phenetic Species shares this problem as well.

• U&M spend some time exploring and defending the implications of pluralism. Every species concept is not embraced as legitimate: “The fact that the word ‘species’ is used by some community to denote a concept does not automatically make that concept a legitimate species concept.” Here they give an example of how this could happen, e.g., a naive and unqualified essentialist species concept that organizes trees by the type of lumber that are pressed from them. “A species concept must be able to carry its weight for a biologist in order for even a pluralist to accept it.” The above three species concepts do just this work.

• Why is pluralism the right approach to species? U&M cite four reasons (i) while multiple concepts differ in the details (such as in boundary cases concerning specific taxa) multiple concepts are productively used by practitioners, (ii) our species concepts agree organizationally, even if there is no settled case of a species concept, e.g., “…biologists can often proceed without specifying which species concept they are using, and evidence relevant to one species concept can be taken as probative for another” (iii) because no concept applies to all instances, each concept consists of different features, and are applicable on a case-to-case basis, and (iv) an arbitrary fineness of grain is involved where theories can be refined, e.g., a species may be made larger or smaller pending refined observations, distinguishing populations from subpopulations.

• It is here U&M advance the prima facie case for art concept pluralism, arguing that
pluralism is “neither a retreat position nor a stopgap for a failed essentialist program” and that “...the philosophy of art needs the rough equivalent of biology’s several species concepts.” Pluralism works when there is at least more than one plausible art concept. They then point out a potential objection to their pluralistic account, noting that one could think a potential asymmetry exists between species and art. The objection: In art there is no clear specification of what the candidates objects are, while in biology, there is already in a place a well-defined domain of organisms. U&M think this to be wrong, citing viruses and prions as boundary cases for organism candidates. Furthermore, “...a successful species concept need not partition all organisms into species...”

- U&M offer up a general template for art concept pluralism, sketching out four concepts. I will very briefly overview these.

  - **Historical Art**: Artifacts emerging from art-historical narratives (Carroll 1993, Levinson 1990, Stecker 1997).
  - **Conventional Art**: Artifacts accepted or recognized by certain artworld conventions and institutions (Dickie 1984, 1997, Stecker 1997).
  - **Aesthetic Art**: Artifacts satisfying some aesthetic attitude, experience, or value (Beardsley 1983, Zangwill 1995, Iseminger 2000).
  - **Communicative Art**: Artifacts that act as vehicles for communication of certain representational, semantic, or expressive content (Danto 1981, Dilworth 2004).

- Each concept remains applicable in some domains, and fails in others, thus, there is no consensus about what art is. “We only run into trouble when we demand that one of them apply to all domains and for all purposes.”

- U&M claim that problem cases can thus be addressed from a “variety of perspectives” importantly shifting the focus from questions like “What concept of art best captures all problem cases?” to “What particular art concept best captures this particular kind of problem case?” Next U&M survey some potential objections, arguing that the art concept has not just a two-tier arrangement between art concept and particular artifacts, but a three-tier arrangement, between art concept, specific works of art, and particular instances of the work (similar to the three-tier arrangement of species concept). Here’s an example that essentially summarizes U&M’s pluralistic methodology: Consider Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, a single-instance work that, over the centuries, has been vandalized, and in general deteriorated and significantly re-painted. Is *Night Watch* then the same painting as it was in its initial inception? Using our historical...
art concept we might say “yes,” but employing our AESTHETIC art concept we might say “no.” The point u&m are trying to make is that there is no ultimate judgment waiting for Night Watch, what suffices is in part, dependent on the operative art concept, “...the fact and features of the case that are relevant to the answer depend on the ART concept.”

• What are the consequences of employing art concept pluralism? For one, it shifts our philosophical focus, e.g., demonstrating that a certain art concept fails will no longer be enough to ground outright rejection of that concept. Or in u&m’s own words: “Showing that CONVENTIONAL ART fails to capture products of Appalachian whittling does not show that we ought to reject CONVENTIONAL ART; it shows that we ought not to employ CONVENTIONAL ART if we want to appreciate the respects in which the whittling is art.”

7 References


