Definitions of art

Chapter · January 2013

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DEFINITIONS OF ART

Definition and its purpose

Defining can take a variety of forms: for instance, pointing to examples, enumerating all the things that fall under the term at issue, or legislating how a term will be used. One type of definition, sometimes called 'essential' or 'real' definition, has special power as an analytic tool. A real definition of something, X say, would identify a set of properties such that each and every X has all the properties that make up the set and only Xs have that set of properties. A real definition specifies the properties each of which is *necessary* for something's being an X and which, taken as a group, are also *sufficient* for something's being an X. In other words, a definition of X characterizes what all Xs and only Xs have in common. For instance, a widow is a woman who has lost her husband by death and who has not re-married. In this case, there are three necessary conditions that together are sufficient for someone's being a widow.

Several points should be noticed. Sometimes a person may be able to identify and refer to Xs without being able to define what makes something an X. For instance, she might acquire a working mastery of the relevant concept as a result of being introduced to a range of typical examples. People could identify water successfully long before science revealed its essential molecular structure. And conversely, someone who knows how Xs are defined might not be able to apply that definition to settle in an uncontroversial way the status of borderline or otherwise 'hard' cases, or even to identify ordinary instances. For example, I can know that a person is bald if his scalp wholly or partly lacks hair, yet not be sure of a particular man whether he is bald. Finally, it need not be the case that a thing's defining essence reveals anything about how and why it is important to us. For instance, speeding is legally defined as exceeding the maximum rate of progress specified for a given route, but this tells us nothing about why we

care to set such limits.

Early definitions of art

In the past, art has been variously defined as imitation or representation (Plato 1955), as a medium for the transmission of feelings (Tolstoy 1995), as intuitive expression (Croce 1920) and as significant form (Bell 1914). Judged as essential definitions, these are unsatisfactory. There are two ways in which a definition of art could fail: by listing a property that not all artworks possess or by identifying a set of properties that is not exclusive to artworks. The theories mentioned seem to fail on both counts. Some musical and painted artworks are abstract; they do not imitate or represent any other thing. Some artworks deliberately eschew expressiveness, while others lack significant form. Moreover, the features offered as definitional are not, after all, exclusive to artworks. Holiday snaps are imitative of the visual arrays they picture, but are not artworks. Many of the things that transmit emotion, or give intuitive expression to their creator's feelings, or display significant form, are not artworks. For instance, advertisements often succeed in communicating and arousing emotion, keening can be an intuitive expression of grief, and the order in which mileage signs follow each other displays significant form, but none of them normally count as art.

Even if they do not characterize an essence that all and only artworks display such theories may be useful either for recommending what artworks should be like, or for isolating and drawing attention to d important or valuable features of artworks or art forms.

Is the definition of art impossible?

With the failure of these traditional approaches, one might doubt that art is definable. Morris Weitz (1956) argues that artworks are united by a web of family resemblances, not by the kind of essence sought by a real definition. The problem with this claim is that everything resembles every other thing, so the invocation of resemblances cannot explain the unity and integrity of any concept. Weitz also maintains that definitions apply only to closed, unalterable concepts and that art, with its changing and unpredictable future, cannot be defined. Again, the claim is unconvincing. The class of meals I have eaten keeps growing and sometimes takes in new and unusual instances, but what alters is the class's membership, not its defining characteristics. It could be part, or a consequence, of the unchanging essence of art that many of its instances are created to be original in some respects.

Weitz insists that, when we look and see, we do not find any property common to all artworks. He could be right about that, but what might follow is not that art is indefinable but, rather, that the defining properties are non-perceptible, relational ones.

If this last observation is correct, it reveals as misguided the tradition that sought to define art in terms of aesthetic properties, where these were conceived as internal, perceptible, non-relational features.

"Cluster" theorists (Gaut 2000, Dutton 2006) have suggested that something is art if it meets a sufficient number of art-relevant criteria, none of which is necessarily satisfied by all works of art. They proposes this view as anti-essentialist because the theory allows there will be very many ways different works qualify as art. Some other proponents of the view (e.g., Meskin 2007, Longworth & Scarantino 2010) see this approach as compatible with giving a disjunctive definition for art, however.

Meanwhile, "prototype" theorists also reject the search for jointly necessary and sufficient conditions, maintaining instead that a concept's instances stand to it in a more complex, similarity-based fashion (Dean 2003). For criticism, see Adajian 2005 and Stecker 2010.

Definitions since the 1960s

Most definitions proposed since the 1960s identify complex relational properties as essential to art's character. One convenient classification divides recent definitions into functional and procedural ones. Functionalists argue that something is an artwork only if it succeeds in achieving the purpose for which we have art. Functionalists differ over art's purpose, but a common line suggests that its function is to provide a pleasurable aesthetic experience. By contrast, proceduralists hold that something becomes an artwork only if it is made according to the appropriate process or formula, regardless of how well it serves the purpose of art.

The following is a functionalist definition: an artwork is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an aesthetic experience valuable for its marked aesthetic character, or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangement that is typically intended to have this capacity (Beardsley 1982). A more recent version of functionalism by Zangwill (2007) places the emphasis not on the aesthetic

experience but on the generation of aesthetic properties as a result of the artist's insight that this could be achieved via the organization of certain non-aesthetic properties. On this account, aesthetic properties are valuable to the extent they are beautiful. (For other versions of functionalism, see Lind 1992 and Anderson 2000.)

Whereas functionalism makes the value of art central to its nature, procedural definitions are purely descriptive and non-evaluative. The most famous example is the 'institutional' account offered by George Dickie. His first definition (Dickie 1974) analyzes 'work of art' as (i) an artifact, (ii) 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 the Artworld. The social character of art is emphasized yet more in the revised definition he proposed in 1984: (i) an artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of an artwork; (ii) a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an Artworld public; (iii) 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; (iv) the Artworld is the totality of all Artworld systems; and (v) an Artworld system is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an Artworld public. The "Artworld" is the historical and social setting constituted by the changing practices and conventions of art, the heritage of works, the intentions of artists, the writings of critics, and so forth. Notice that Dickie's later definition is circular, which is thought usually to be a fault in a definition, but which he regards as an accurate reflection of art's inflected nature.

Functional and procedural approaches to art's definition need not be opposed. I have characterized each in terms of a necessary condition that it regards as central, but it could be that something is an artwork only if it satisfies *both* the functional and the procedural requirements. Nevertheless, much avant-garde art that does not seek the generation of pleasing aesthetic effects forces functionalism and proceduralism apart. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, for instance, challenge deeply rooted assumptions about art's nature and purpose. Nevertheless, they satisfy the 'institutional' requirements for arthood: they are created by an established artist, presented along with other artworks, and discussed by art historians.

Functionalism faces these objections: it is difficult to find any single or pervasive function that is potentially served by all artworks. And if all artworks must be functionally successful, it is difficult to account for very bad art. Also, the theory tends to be conservative in dismissing from the

realm of art some philosophically stimulating recent works, many of which are widely accepted as art even if they challenge what was thought to be foundational or valuable about their predecessors. Moreover, functionalism does not readily encompass works with social, ritual, or didactic functions, as against aesthetic ones, as is so for much non-Western and popular art.

Proceduralism faces these criticisms: not all Artworlds are sufficiently institutionalized to generate a structure of roles and authorities that could explain how the status of art is conferred. And it is not clear that the social practices of art-making are distinctive enough to reveal what distinguishes artworks from the products of outwardly similar cultural activities. Moreover, proceduralists have difficulty in acknowledging the artworks of isolated artists and of those who operate outside the ambit of the Artworld, such as embroiderers.

Historical definitions

Arthur C. Danto (1973) has argued that a piece cannot become art unless there is a place prepared for it within the Artworld in consequence of the prior history of art production, both generally and by the given artist. Picasso could make an artwork by painting his tie, but earlier artists could not. Observations like Danto's have made philosophers aware of the dependence of a work's art-status on the art-historical context in which it is created and presented. In turn, this has led to definitions that regard the process by which art's history unfolds as part of art's defining character.

Historical definitions can be reflexive, taking a recursive form: something is an artwork only if it stands in the appropriate relation to its artistic forebears. For completeness, any definition of this form should be supplemented by an account of how the chronologically first artworks became such. I have argued (Davies 2007 Ch. 5) that it is not convincing to maintain that first art could be stipulated as such (as Levinson did in 1979) or that it attains the status of art retroactively (as suggested by Carney 1994). It is more plausible to suppose that it is in terms of their functionality that the first pieces qualify as art, and that the relevant function concerns aesthetic features and the pleasure we take in them, rather than (as maintained in Carroll 2001 Pt. 2) in the complex and subtle features of representation, expression, and communication that become prominent in later artworks.

When it comes to the defining relation in which art now stands to art

past, most theorists agree that it can display these various forms: reference, repetition, amplification, or repudiation. They differ over the content of the defining relation, however. According to Jerrold Levinson (1979, 1989, 1993, 2002), something is art if it is intended for regard in one of the ways in which prior artworks have correctly been regarded. He allows that something intended for a particular regard would be art in the case where that regard was invited by earlier artworks although the intender was not aware of this fact. James D. Carney (199la, 1991b, 1994) holds that it is in terms of its style that the present candidate is united with prior artworks. For Carney, artistic style includes schema for conveying content, as well as characteristic choices of subject matter, materials, and approaches. Noël Carroll (2001 Pt. 2) sees the link between the present piece and past art as residing in a narrative that encompasses the two. This narrative must be accurate, must explain later events as generated out of earlier ones, and must track the adoption of a series of actions and alternatives as appropriate means to an end on the part of a person who arrived at an intelligible assessment of the art historical context in such a way that he or she resolved to change it in accordance with recognizable and live purposes of the practice. Though Carroll denies that his proposal is a definition, I treat it as one here because it has the same general structure and function as the definitions offered as such by Levinson and Carney.

Each of these theories has been criticized and defended. (For example, see Davies 1991, Stecker 1997, Dickie 1997, Stock 2003, Currie 2010.) Rather than debating the detail of individual definitions, I draw attention to a difficulty, which I call 'the Artworld relativity problem,' faced by this general approach. It presupposes the existence of a continuous tradition — that is, of an historically and culturally unified body of work — to which the newly created piece is related in the appropriate fashion. In other words, theories of this kind make art relative to an Artworld. But there is more than one Artworld, more than one tradition of making artworks. There may be as many independently generated Artworlds as there are distinct cultures producing their own artworks. Most historically reflexive theories are too parochial in that they proceed as if there is only one Artworld, by focusing narrowly on the Western context in which 'high' art is made while ignoring 'low' art and non-Western art.

Alternatively, if the theory acknowledges that there are several Artworlds, then it is exposed as incomplete. When it is generalized, the theory has this form: what makes something an artwork is that the appropriate relation holds between it and prior works created within the

same Artworld, whether it is the Western 'high' Artworld or the Artworld of some African tribe within which the artist operates, and even if that relation is realized or satisfied differently in distinct Artworlds at a given time. When characterizing the nature of Artworlds, the theories can draw attention to the general pattern of relations they share in common, but not to the detail of the *relata* — the intended regards, styles, or unifying narratives — that generate this pattern, since these details differ from Artworld to Artworld. It is obvious, though, that their historically reflexive character is not distinctive to Artworlds. Many practices that are not art-making ones are historically reflexive in similar ways and thereby exhibit the same abstract form. So, when treated as non-parochial, the theories are incomplete because they do not spell out criteria for distinguishing Artworlds from other social arrangements displaying similar general structures of relations.

The artworld relativity problem would not arise if there were only one Artworld, that of the West. And it has been argued that our current concept of art emerged only in eighteenth-century Europe (Shiner 2001). According to this view, art is not found prior to the eighteenth-century or beyond the West. Yet the understanding of art that first appeared in the eighteenth century — namely, art is to be contemplated for the sake of its aesthetic properties, these being purely perceptual and available to the person with taste, whether or not she knows anything about the production of the work in question, the practices it assumed as background, and the art-historical tradition to which it belongs — has been challenged as inadequate in the second half of the twentieth century. And it is undeniable that other times and cultures have music, mime, story telling, painting, dancing, and the like. If we take an appropriately broad view of art, we can see that the Western concept of "high" art is only one species within the genus (Dissanayake 1988, Moravcsik 1988, Dutton 2000, Davies 2006, Davies 2007 Ch. 4; for critical discussion, see Shiner 2003). Other species might include religious, decorative, folk, domestic, popular, and mass art.

There are several lessons to take from this debate. Until we have some idea of the concept's scope, we will not be well placed to evaluate proposed definitions. As just indicated, it seems reasonable to believe the concept that needs to be defined is broad rather than narrow. Second, most of the definitions on offer make no attempt to accommodate non-Western and "low" art. Because no attempt is made to defend this approach — for example, by arguing that the concept is peculiar to the West — this dereliction is difficult to explain.

Arts versus art?

The observation that all cultures possess music, dancing, picturing, and so on, suggests an approach to definition that would avoid the Artworld relativity problem. We might rather define the art forms, with art as what falls within them (Lopes 2008). Against this view, is not plain that all artworks fall under an art form or that all that fall under any art form are artworks, and there is the issue of accounting for the manner in which new art forms acquire their status as such (Davies 2008, Meskin 2008).

Hybrid definitions

I observed earlier that functionalism and proceduralism need not be exclusive. Also, either approach might be combined with historical reflexiveness. For instance, it could be held that art is functional and that the function of art changes through time, depending on how it has been realized in the past. Or it could be claimed that the procedures through which artworks gain their standing are themselves subject to historical forces internal to the Artworld. When these various approaches are combined, I call the resulting definitions 'hybrids.' The idea is that hybrid definitions will be superior, because they can combine the advantages of several theoretical perspectives while avoiding the weaknesses that plague each taken in isolation.

Arthur Danto (1997: 195) has suggested that a work of art is to be (i) about something, and (ii) to embody its meaning. He doubts that these necessary conditions are jointly sufficient. Additional conditions have been intimated in other of Danto's writings (for instance, Danto 1981). Carroll (1993) sums up Danto's theory as follows: something is a work of art if and only if it has a subject about which it projects some attitude or point of view (has a style) by means of rhetorical ellipsis (generally metaphorical), which ellipsis, in turn, engages audience participation in filling in what is missing (interpretation). In Carroll's account, the first condition corresponds to the requirement that the work be about something, and the others explain what is meant by the idea that the work is to embody the meaning of what it is about. A further constraint present in Danto's writing from 1964 is that the work in question and the interpretations thereof require an art-historical context.

This account displays elements of functionalism, proceduralism, and

historical reflexivity. It suggests that the artwork has the purpose of engaging the audience in an interpretation of the subject that the work is about. Moreover, in invoking its art-historical setting as among the determinants of the work's identity, Danto (1986) refers to the structure and roles of the Artworld as well as to art's historical evolution.

The major criticisms of Danto's theory have challenged his claim that artworks necessarily are *about* something (see Beardsley 1982) and his methodological assumptions. The first is that every artwork could be perceptually indistinguishable from "a mere real thing", which he uses to motivate his rejection of the traditional view, according to which art is marked by perceptible features of a distinctively aesthetic kind. The second is that every artwork could perceptually be indistinguishable from a different artwork, which he uses to attack the institutional theory according to which otherwise identical items, both of which have achieved art status, have the same aesthetic content. (For clarification and critical discussion of Danto's methodological assumptions, see Fisher 1995.) One might also question whether all art is meant to elicit interpreting and, if so, if such interpretations must be constrained, as Danto maintains, by what was intended by the artist.

Another hybrid definition is defended by Robert Stecker (1997). He maintains that an item is an artwork if and only if it is in one of the central art forms at the time of its creation and is intended to fulfill a function art has at that time, or it is an artifact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function. Though it is primarily functional, this definition agrees with the proceduralist's claim that something can be art without fulfilling one of art's functions; for works produced in central art forms, such as poetry, painting and music, the intention to fulfill is sufficient. The historically reflexive aspect of the theory lies in its treatment of art's functions, which are said to evolve in an open-ended fashion so that there will be resemblance rather than identity between the valuable functions of art in one period and those in another. That is, art of the present relates to art of the past in terms of the historical connectedness of the (changing) functions they serve, or are intended to serve. Meanwhile, Stecker dissociates his own view from some elements that went along with traditional versions of functionalism. The more significant functions of art are experience-causing ones, but the relevant experiences may be cognitive, or emotion-centered, or interpretation-centered, not solely aesthetic. Moreover, he denies both that aesthetic experience must be founded solely on perception and that it must be 'disinterested.' He does not think that only *sensuous* features of artworks are relevant to their power to provide aesthetic experience, and he allows

that an interest in an item's practical utility could be compatible with a concern with its art-relevant features.

Stecker's brand of functionalism inevitably invites some new questions. Though it surely is an improvement to recognize that the function of art is not singular and unchanging, the more functions one countenances and the more malleable they are, the harder it is to believe that the (intended) purposes of art are distinctive of it.

Apart from defending his own definition, Stecker (2000) has argued that all plausible definitions should be hybrid. Since art has no unchanging function or form, functionalist definitions must acknowledge art's historicity. Yet, reference to art's function is ineliminable from accounts of the arthood of the first works, since these lacked artistic predecessors and institutional settings. And the importance of artworld institutions and practices must be granted in order to explain how items can become art, either through their appropriation by artworld members or by falling squarely within established art-genres, when they are otherwise without artistic merit.

Artworld relativity again

Whatever their other advantages, the hybrid definitions just mentioned fail to escape the Artworld relativity problem that was described earlier. Any theory that makes arthood depend on historical reflexivity within a given Artworld, while allowing (as it should) that there are different Artworlds each with its own history, fails to complete its analysis satisfactorily if it does not analyze the nature of Artworlds.

The Artworld relativity problem also arises for Dickie's institutional theory, though his definition is not historically reflexive. He defends the ahistoricism of his theory by observing that it can accept and explain the importance of art's history while denying that that historic pattern or process contributes to art's essential nature (Dickie 1997). For him, the crucial relation is between the candidate piece and the Artworld's institutional structure, not between the candidate piece and the Artworld's historical development. Nevertheless, his definition does make art relative to an Artworld, and it leaves him with the problem of distinguishing Artworlds from other social institutions. It is implausible to think that all and only Artworlds exhibit a particular social structure, but, if art is itself Artworld-relative, there must be something common to Artworlds beyond the fact that

their products are artworks.

Not all definitions are subject to the objection. A theory, such as pure functionalism, that does not make art depend for its nature on its connection to an Artworld can avoid it. On the face of it, though, such views are unattractive for they imply what seems obviously to be false: that any artwork would have been such wherever and whenever it was created. And as soon as one allows that a thing's capacity for fulfilling the function or functions of art depends on the social structure of the context in which is made and presented, or on the kinds of pieces that have been accepted as art in the past, the problem returns.

By drawing attention to the ubiquity of the Artworld relativity problem I do not mean to imply that the enterprise of defining art is bound to fail. The point, rather, is that progress in analyzing art's nature is likely to demand of philosophers closer attention to the wider social setting in which art is produced and received, and a greater sensitivity to the variety of such settings, many of which fall outside the ambit of the Artworld of 'high' Western art.

See also Formalism, Expressivism, Aesthetic universals, High versus low art.

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