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ON THE NATURE, INTERPRETATION, AND VALUE OF ARTWORKS

Joshua Steven Gillon

A DISSERTATION

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Primary Advisor: Alexander Nehamas

Secondary Advisor: Gideon Rosen

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Abstract

First, I defend a theory, or rather a class of theories, about the nature of art.

Second, I defend a view about the interpretation of art.

Regarding the nature of art, I argue that it must be understood in terms of art institutions. According to the view that I defend, a proper subset of artworks, the paradigm artworks, count as artworks in virtue of the relation they stand in to art institutions and art-related practices. Other artworks, those that are not paradigms, count as artworks in virtue of the ways in which they are related to the paradigms. This view of the nature of art, I have argue, allows us to partially account for the fact that art is peculiarly valuable and also allows us to answer skeptical worries about whether there even is such a thing as the nature of art.

Regarding art interpretation, I argue that it is of a kind with the interpretation of utterances, facial expressions, body language, and even statistics. When we interpret artworks, we appeal to them in order to gain information that we are interested in having or to answer questions about which we are curious in connection with them. What distinguishes art interpretation from other sorts of interpretation, more than anything else, is the range of questions that we are prepared to appeal to artworks to help us answer. This view of art interpretation also allows us to account, in a small way, for the peculiar value of artworks.

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0. Introduction

In what follows, I wish to accomplish two main objectives. First, I wish to defend a theory, or rather a class of theories, about the nature of art. Second, I wish to defend a view about the interpretation of art.

Regarding the nature of art, I wish to argue that it must be understood in terms of art institutions. According to the view that I defend, a proper subset of artworks, which I call the *paradigm artworks*, count as artworks in virtue of the relation they stand in to art institutions and certain art-related practices, including the practices of art history, art criticism, and the like. Other artworks, those that are not paradigms, count as artworks in virtue of the ways in which they are related to other artworks. This view of the nature of art, I argue, allows us to partially account for the fact that art is peculiarly valuable and also allows us to answer skeptical worries about whether there even is such a thing as the nature of art.

Regarding art interpretation, I wish to argue that it is of a kind with the interpretation of utterances, facial expressions, body-language, and—perhaps more strangely—statistics and scientific data. When we interpret artworks, I argue, we appeal to them in order to gain information that we are interested in having, or to answer questions about which we are curious, in connection with them. What distinguishes art interpretation from other sorts of interpretation, more than anything else, is the range of questions that we are prepared to appeal to artworks to help us answer. This view of art interpretation also allows us to account, in a small way, for the peculiar value of artworks.

I will proceed as follows. In the first chapter, I will raise the difficult question, “What is the nature of art, that artworks should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?” I will explain why this question is so difficult and why some philosophers have thought that it rests on a false presupposition, namely that art has a nature. In the second chapter, I will address these difficulties head on. There I will argue that skeptical worries can be answered, but that an adequate answer will require us to define “artwork” recursively and in terms of paradigm cases. I will argue that the most plausible way of defining “artwork” in that way is to do so in terms of art institutions and our other art-related practices. In the third chapter, I will defend my view against objections. This will complete my case for my views on the nature of art.

In the fourth chapter, I will argue that the nature of art tells us little about art interpretation. I will put forward a popular view about art interpretation that I believe is wrong, but that accounts for many puzzling features of some cases of art interpretation: what an artwork means is determined by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it. I will explain why this view is appealing and make a case in its favor. In the fifth chapter, I will begin to argue against this view of interpretation. I will argue that many interpretable things, such as utterances, actually have a plurality of meanings and can be correctly interpreted in a variety of ways. I will defend a view of interpretation according to which artworks have a similar plurality of meanings. In the sixth chapter, I will use my view of interpretation to finish my argument against the idea that the meaning of an artwork is determined by the communicative intentions of an artist. I will make a few brief remarks about what art interpretation has to do with the value of art.

1. The Need for Aesthetic Theories

1.0 Introduction

I have two objectives in this chapter. I want, first, to raise a hard question and, second, to explain why the question I raise is hard to answer. Here is the hard question:

The Hard Question

What is the nature of art, that artworks should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?

This question presupposes a rather bold claim:

The Bold Claim

Something about the nature of art accounts for the peculiar value of artworks.

And this claim, in turn, rests on two further presuppositions: first, there is such a thing as the nature of art and, second, artworks are peculiarly valuable.

Why accept these presuppositions? Why think that artworks are peculiarly valuable? Well, consider the following case:

Artwork Destroyed

While walking to his favorite coffee shop one day, Ramrod Bluenose discovers an artwork on the side of the road, a painting to be more precise. Although it is beautifully painted and excellently composed, the painting expresses a social message with which Ramrod scrupulously disagrees. Rather than suffering some unwitting passing youth to be corrupted by it, Ramrod destroys the painting without a second thought.

If you are anything like me, this must strike you as a small tragedy. You might think, “To destroy without hesitation a work of art simply because one disagrees with what it expresses betrays a fault of character. Good artworks are valuable, even when one disagrees with what they seem to say. Ramrod Bluenose has lived up to his scruples, but in so doing he has also deprived the world of something valuable. He had no right to do that. None of us has.”

Your thought might be reinforced by contrasting Artwork Destroyed to this case, in which no artworks are destroyed:

Toaster Destroyed

While walking to her favorite bakery one day, Gloria Gourmand discovers an old, one-of-a-kind toaster lying on the curb. The toaster is not an artwork; it’s just a toaster. Still, it looks like it may be in working condition. Upon seeing it, images of hungry people toasting mediocre bagels for breakfast spring unbidden to Gloria’s mind. Her finer tastes are offended and she destroys the toaster in a fit of gastronomic rage.

This does not strike me as a tragedy at all and, if you are anything like me, it does not strike you as a tragedy either. There is nothing so terrible about destroying an old toaster—even if it is one-of-a-kind—that one finds lying abandoned along the roadside.

The point here is simple. Most of us value in art in a way that we do not value toasters. This is not to deny that we value toasters. Of course we do. It’s just that the value of art is peculiar. Artwork Destroyed, but not Toaster Destroyed, is a tragedy. And it seems to me that the best explanation for this is just that artworks are peculiarly valuable; artworks are valuable in a way that toasters typically are not.

I wish to be clear on this point. My claim is not that all artworks are valuable or that all valuable artworks are valuable in the same way. Perhaps many artworks are worthless. Perhaps different valuable artworks are valuable in different ways. Perhaps some artworks are valuable in just the way that toasters are. So be it. Nor am I claiming that toasters cannot be artworks. Perhaps some of them are. I only claim that valuable artworks are often valuable in a peculiar way. They are often valuable in a way that non-artworks—including money, persons, and most toasters—typically are not.

We could illustrate this point more elaborately by considering additional pairs of cases—Artwork Set On Fire vs. Money Set On Fire, Artwork Defaced vs. Person Defaced, etc. Such pairs of cases would, I am confident, reveal that we value neither money nor persons in quite the same way that we value valuable artworks.

Now, why think that there is such a thing as the nature of art? Well, think about the difference between Artwork Destroyed and Toaster Destroyed. Why is one a tragedy but not the other? It cannot be that the artwork is beautiful but the toaster is not; the toaster could be beautiful or the painting could be ugly. It cannot be that the painting is handmade but the toaster is not; the toaster could be handmade. It cannot be that the painting expresses an unacceptable social message to its viewers but the toaster does not; the toaster could express a message to Gloria Gourmand that she just cannot accept. Redescribe and modify the two cases however you like. Make the toaster as much like the painting as you wish. So long as the painting is still a valuable work of art and the toaster still is not a work of art, Artwork Destroyed will still strike me as tragic in a way that Toaster Destroyed does not, no matter how great the toaster is. And this makes me

suspect that the really important evaluative difference between the two cases boils down to the fact that one involves the destruction of an artwork but the other does not.

Now how can we ever be in a position to know that the destruction of something is a peculiar sort of tragedy simply by knowing that what is destroyed is a good artwork, rather than a good toaster? Why are we inclined to think that the destruction of an artwork is tragic in a way that the destruction of a mere toaster is not, even when all other things are equal? Why should the fact that a thing is an artwork have any bearing at all on how we are disposed to value it? I find no satisfactory answer to these questions except for the obvious one: something about the nature of art accounts for the peculiar value of artworks. And so I accept The Bold Claim with its attendant presuppositions.

This brings us to The Hard Question. To answer it, I will have to do two things. First, I will have to say something about what the nature of art is. Second, I will have to explain how, and in what sense, the nature of art accounts for the peculiar value of artworks. Before doing either of these things, however, I am going to explain some of the reasons why they are so hard to do. Hopefully, by keeping the biggest difficulties clearly in view from the start, I will be able to avoid some major pitfalls when I attempt to answer The Hard Question in a subsequent chapter.

1.1 Aesthetic Theories

To say exactly what the nature of art is, one must offer what Morris Weitz calls an *aesthetic theory*. An aesthetic theory, as Weitz uses the term, is a statement of the following form:

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x is F .¹

Here F should be understood as being the same in both statements. Aesthetic theories, thus understood, purport to tell us the necessary and sufficient conditions in virtue of which something counts as an artwork. They purport to tell us the nature of art.

Now the word “art” is ambiguous. So understanding aesthetic theories and how they relate to The Hard Question will require us to disambiguate. We sometimes use the word “art” and its cognates in an evaluative sense, other times in a classificatory or descriptive sense. For example, you might say, “Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* is a real work of art. It is an enormous achievement and among the most important writings in the history of philosophy.” If you say this, you are evaluating the *Prior Analytics*. You are saying or expressing that you greatly value it. Your use of the phrase “work of art” in this context is evaluative, not descriptive; it is an honorific, nothing more.

By contrast, you might say, “Marcel Duchamp’s *Trap* may be a work of art, but it isn’t a very good one. Small wonder no one even noticed it when it was first exhibited.”² If you say this, your use of the phrase “work of art” is not evaluative. Otherwise, it would make no sense in light of your negative evaluation of the artwork in question. Rather, by referring to *Trap* as a work of art, you are classifying it with paintings, sculptures, operas, ballets, movies, sonnets, and other such things. Call things that are works of art in the

¹ Following Weitz (1956), who is a bit sloppy with his definition. Explicitly, he defines an aesthetic theory as a statement of the form, “For all x , x is an artwork if and only if x is F .” However, he frequently argues on the assumption that aesthetic theories specify that in virtue of which something counts as an artwork, rather than merely specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing’s being an artwork. For example, see his criticism of Clive Bell’s theory of significant form (ibid: 14).

² *Trap* was an ordinary coat rack that Duchamp purchased and exhibited as an artwork in 1917. It went unnoticed at the exhibition.

first, evaluative sense *artworks-E*. Call things that are artworks in the second, classificatory sense, *artworks-C*.

Some things are both artworks-C and artworks-E. For example, you and I can probably agree that Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* falls into this category, whereas Duchamp's *Trap* (because it is not an artwork-E) and Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* (because it is not an artwork-C) do not.

With that in mind, we can say something more about aesthetic theories and The Hard Question, which is certainly not this:

A Stupid Question

What is the nature of art, that artworks-E should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?

This is an odd question. The nature of art has nothing to do with the value of many artworks-E. For instance, it has nothing to do with the value of the *Prior Analytics*, which neither is an artwork-C nor is about art. Fortunately, The Hard Question is not A Stupid Question; it is about artworks-C. If aesthetic theories are to help us answer it—if they are to tell us something about the nature of art that helps us to account for the value of artworks-C—then they too must be about artworks-C.

This is part of why The Hard Question is so hard. To say of something that it is an artwork-C is not to say anything evaluative about it; it is merely to classify it. Yet, according to The Bold Claim, the appropriateness of such a classification—despite the fact that it is not evaluative—is supposed to help account for the value of artworks. This is what Artwork Destroyed and Toaster Destroyed mutually seem to demand. For all these two cases tell us, the painting from Artwork Destroyed and the toaster from Toaster

Destroyed may be alike in the extent to which they are each artworks-E. Nevertheless, one is valuable in a way that the other is not just because it is a good artwork-C.

From here on out, it is artworks-C that will be of primary interest. When I use the word “artwork” and its cognates, it will be artworks-C that I have in mind.

1.2 A False Start

The Hard Question would be easy if artworks were like trees. Trees are valuable. They convert carbon dioxide into oxygen, removing greenhouse gasses from the air and allowing us to breathe. Their wood can be used to make houses, pencils, and skateboards. Presumably, something about the nature of trees helps to account for these facts. So, presumably, something about the nature of trees helps to account for the value of trees. Nevertheless, to call something a tree is to describe or to classify it, not to evaluate it.

The fact that the nature of trees helps to account for the value of trees, even though to call something a tree is not to evaluate it, has to do with certain valuable features that trees have and certain valuable effects that trees bring about. Trees are wood and wood is valuable. Trees produce oxygen and oxygen is valuable. There is no mystery about the value of wood or oxygen, since both of them are useful in the achievement of various desirable and important ends.

Similarly, if it were in the nature of art for artworks to have certain features or to bring about certain effects, and if those features and effects were perspicuously valuable, then the nature of art would unproblematically account for the value of artworks, even given that to call something an artwork is not to evaluate it.

Many aesthetic theories take precisely this approach to the value of art. However, none of them is adequate. To understand why, it will be helpful to consider one such aesthetic theory here: the formalist theory of Clive Bell. I should mention in passing that Bell's theory has been widely criticized for a variety of reasons.³ Here, however, I will not be concerned with the more particular problems facing Bell's theory. Rather, I will use Bell's theory to illustrate quite general problems that threaten to undermine any aesthetic theory at all.

According to Bell, the characteristic feature of artworks is to produce distinctive emotional responses in sensitive observers. The nature of art is simply to have whatever features account for the production of such emotional responses. As Bell puts it:

The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. All sensitive people agree that there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art. [...] This emotion is called the aesthetic emotion; and if we can discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it, we shall have solved what I take to be the central problem of aesthetics.⁴

Bell suggests that the common and peculiar quality common to everything that produces an aesthetic emotion in sensitive observers is *significant form*.⁵ It does not matter much, for present purposes, what significant form is. So, for simplicity, let's just treat

³ However, for a very sympathetic reading of Bell, see McLaughlin (1977).

⁴ 1914: 262.

⁵ Ibid.

“significant form” as shorthand for “whatever feature produces an aesthetic emotion in sensitive observers.”⁶

Bell’s aesthetic theory, if true, allows us to account for the peculiar value of artworks and to answer The Hard Question. Here is his theory:

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x possesses significant form.

Given the way we are treating “significant form,” we can effectively modify this statement to say this:

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x produces an aesthetic emotion in sensitive observers.

Assuming that aesthetic emotions are valuable, Bell’s theory tells us that it is in the nature of art to produce something of value. Just as trees are valuable (in part, at least) because they are a source of wood and oxygen, so artworks are valuable because they are a source of aesthetic emotions. Or so the theory suggests.

Bell’s aesthetic theory is subject to obvious criticisms and it is worthwhile to think about whether Bell could satisfactorily answer questions like the following. Is it possible to define “significant form” in an informative way? Does no-good art produce aesthetic emotions in sensitive observers or does only high-quality art have that effect? Can nature, which is not an artwork, produce aesthetic emotions in sensitive observers? What are the aesthetic emotions? In what sense are they of the same kind? Etc. While

⁶ Bell himself seems to treat it this way by limiting the denotation of “significant form” to those features of a work that move us emotionally: “These moving combinations and arrangements I have called, for the sake of convenience and for a reason that will appear later, ‘Significant Form’”(ibid: 263).

such questions are important to any consideration of Bell's theory, I wish to set them aside and focus on what I think is a deeper, more general, and more interesting problem.

1.3 Why Artworks Are Not Like Trees

Consider the following case, which is in the spirit of Weitz⁷ and some early work of Arthur Danto:⁸

The Devious Artist

While in the final year of her prestigious MFA program, Foxy Foremost takes an interest in the philosophy of art and learns of Bell's aesthetic theory. At first, she is convinced by it. Then she has a devious idea. For her next project, Foxy attempts to create something that has a great deal in common with many artworks but that will leave sensitive observers cold. The work is a success: it produces no aesthetic emotion in anyone. At first, nobody pays much attention to Foxy's work. But gradually critics come to realize that it is very interesting. By being so similar to so many artworks while, at the same time, lacking the very feature thought (by Bell and his followers) to be essential to art, Foxy's work illustrates something interesting about the nature of art. Once this fact becomes widely recognized, major museums start to exhibit Foxy's work, art historians start writing about it, and members of the art-consuming general public start discussing Foxy's merits as an artist. The work even becomes a

⁷ 1956.

⁸ 1964.

subject of discussion in various art history courses at major universities. In short, the artistic and broader linguistic community comes to accept Foxy's work as an artwork, as a counterexample to Bell's theory, and, consequently, as a serious artistic achievement.

What can this case tell us about Bell's aesthetic theory?

Well, the first thing to notice is that whatever it tells us about Bell's theory applies equally well to very many other theories. For suppose that, according to some seemingly plausible aesthetic theory, artworks count as artworks in virtue of the fact that they are *F*. Then some devious artist like Foxy might deliberately set out to create something that is not *F* but that is very similar to accepted artworks in many other respects. If she succeeds at her attempt, we may find her work so interesting—simply because it reveals in a clever and pleasing way something subtle about the boundary between artworks and non-artworks—that we consider it art, even though it is not *F*. And it seems like this might be true no matter what *F* is. So the case of The Devious Artist generalizes far beyond Bell's particular theory. Indeed, it seems like whatever it tells us about Bell's theory it tells us about virtually every aesthetic theory.

The second thing to notice about The Devious Artist is that it threatens to refute Bell's aesthetic theory. If the judgment of the artistic and broader linguistic community is a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork, and if the artistic and broader linguistic community sometimes accepts things as artworks because of the clever and pleasing way that they illustrate subtle facts about the boundary demarcating art, then Foxy Foremost has discovered a method for generating counterexamples to Bell's aesthetic theory: create something that is very similar to other artworks but that leaves

sensitive observers cold. And, since the lesson of The Devious Artist seems to generalize to virtually every aesthetic theory, we have here a prima facie case for thinking that no aesthetic theory could ever be true. Some devious artist could always, at least in principle, create a counterexample to it.

If this is right, then it seems that artworks are not like trees: it seems that the value of good art cannot be accounted for by supposing that artworks, by nature, all share some valuable features or produce some valuable effects. A devious artist could always produce an artwork that had none of the valuable features and produced none of valuable effects that are supposed to be characteristic of art but that was interesting and worthy of admiration for just that reason.

So The Devious Artist raises two immediate questions. First, does the artistic and broader linguistic community sometimes accept things as artworks because of what they show us about the nature of art? Second, is the artistic and broader linguistic community a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork? I turn now to these questions.

1.4 Open Terms

Some artworks have been accepted as artworks because of what they show us about the nature of art. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and Duchamp's readymades seem to fall into this category. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* looks like a pile of ordinary Brillo boxes. There is no reason why the resemblance might not have been exact. Duchamp's readymades exactly resemble ordinary shovels, urinals, and coat closets because they are ordinary shovels, urinals, and coat closets. What is noteworthy about such works—what qualifies them for exhibition alongside other artworks—is that they show us something

interesting about the nature of art. And they show us something interesting about art precisely because they have no obvious features to distinguish them from other objects that are not artworks. So some things have been and continue to be accepted as artworks just because of what they show us about the nature of art. So, if the artistic and broader linguistic community is a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork, The Devious Artist seems to refute Bell's aesthetic theory and virtually every other aesthetic theory along with it.

Is the artistic and broader linguistic community a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork? Yes. The most compelling argument for this conclusion is due to Weitz. As Weitz notes, whether something is an artwork is not something that the artistic and linguistic community discovers so much as something that it decides. Consequently, the artistic and linguistic community really cannot be wrong about whether something is a work of art.^{9,10}

It is helpful, in understanding Weitz's point, to compare the word "artwork" to the word "game."¹¹ Suppose that I invent some new activity that I enjoy engaging in with my friends and that I want to know whether this new activity is a game. How do I find out? Well, I don't try to discover some new piece of information about my activity that would

⁹ Which is not to deny that individual members of the artistic and linguistic community may be wrong.

¹⁰ Perhaps the linguistic community could be wrong about whether some object is an artwork if it is misinformed about certain non-aesthetic facts about the object. For example, if the community generally thinks that a nicely eroded rock is a sculpture, it may mistakenly think the rock is an artwork. So, perhaps what I should say is something like this: the artistic and linguistic community cannot be wrong about whether something is a work of art, so long as it is not misinformed about whatever else the object is. Nothing I say below will depend on this.

¹¹ Following Wittgenstein (1953: § 65–75).

settle the question. After all, I invented the activity; I already know all about it. Nor do I attempt to list the essential features that all games have in common and determine whether my new activity shares them. To the contrary, a quick examination of everything that counts as a game may make one seriously question whether there even is any essential feature that all games share. Rather, I just continue to engage in my activity with my friends. If they and the broader linguistic community decide to use the word “game” to refer to my activity, then it is a game. Otherwise it is not. That’s all there is to being a game.¹²

According to Weitz, “artwork,” “novel,” and many other aesthetic terms function just like “game.” Artists frequently create new works that do not clearly fall into, or out of, any of our available categories. When James Joyce wrote *Finnegan’s Wake*, for example, there was a genuinely open question whether he had written a novel. The artistic and linguistic community had to decide how to classify *Finnegan’s Wake*. If we had collectively decided that it was not a novel, we would not have been making a mistake. Our concept of novel was insufficiently precise for us to have been wrong about whether Joyce’s work was one. Similarly, in deciding that *Finnegan’s Wake* was a novel, we were not making a mistake. So the artistic and linguistic community was a reliable guide to whether *Finnegan’s Wake* was a novel for the simple reason that it could not have been collectively wrong. It decided whether *Finnegan’s Wake* was a novel.¹³

Sometimes artists create things of which it is unclear whether they are artworks. When Duchamp’s readymades first appeared, the artistic and linguistic community had to

¹² Weitz 1956: 15.

¹³ The example is Weitz’s (ibid: 15).

decide whether they qualified as art. The fact that these works called for a decision on the part of the artistic and linguistic community suggests that “artwork” functions just like “novel” and “game.” The artistic and linguistic community simply cannot be collectively wrong about whether something is an artwork because it decides whether things are artworks. Part of what makes Duchamp’s readymades artworks is the fact that the artistic and linguistic community accepts them as such.^{14,15}

Weitz refers to words like “game,” “novel,” and “artwork” as *open terms*. To be a bit more precise, according to Weitz an open term is a word that picks out some property, *F*, such that there is some *x* such that whether *x* is *F* is an open question until the linguistic community (or enough of it) decides whether or not to predicate *F* of *x*, after which *x* is *F* (at least partially) in virtue of the fact that,¹⁶ the linguistic community (or enough of it) has decided¹⁷ to predicate *F* of *x*. Given this definition, if “artwork” is an open term, the artistic and linguistic community is a reliable guide to whether something is a work of art.

¹⁴ See *ibid*: 15–6.

¹⁵ Weitz’s point, it must be pointed out, is not about vagueness. “Artwork,” “novel,” “game,” etc. probably are vague—most ordinary language terms are—but Weitz is interested in a different claim, namely that it is part of our ordinary notion of art that whether something counts as an artwork is determined by what the artistic and linguistic community decides, has decided, or, at any rate, would decide to accept as an artwork.

¹⁶ The “in virtue of” is important here; without it, open terms would have little to do with aesthetic theories. This would have serious implications for several arguments considered below.

¹⁷ Weitz is emphatic in claiming that the relevance of the decisions of language-users in resolving open questions is the distinguishing feature of open terms (*ibid*: 15).

1.5 Looking Forward

We are now in a position to explain why The Hard Question is, in fact, very hard. It is hard because answering it seems to require saying something substantive about the nature of art. However, since “artwork” is an open term, The Devious Artist gives strong prima facie reason for thinking that virtually every aesthetic theory—virtually every general statement of the nature of art—is wrong. If every aesthetic theory is wrong, then The Bold Claim is surely false. And since The Bold Claim is presupposed by The Hard Question, The Devious Artist threatens to render The Hard Question impossible.

We can make this basic line of thought more rigorous:

- (1) The artistic community often accepts things as artworks because of what they show us about the nature of art.
- (2) “Artwork” is an open term.
- (3) If “artwork” is an open term, and if the artistic community often accepts things as artworks because of what they show us about the nature of art, then every aesthetic theory is false.
- (4) Therefore every aesthetic theory is false.¹⁸

The conclusion of this argument is generally referred to as *anti-essentialism*.¹⁹ I find it unsatisfying because it leads naturally to the following line of argument:

¹⁸ The argument comes from Weitz, who is less precise than we might wish. Weitz sometimes seems to argue that every non-circular aesthetic theory is necessarily false on the grounds that (i) open terms are impossible to define, (ii) “artwork” is an open term, and (iii) any true non-circular aesthetic theory would define “artwork” (see *ibid*: 16). Regardless, I find the above argument more plausible than the one just alluded to, largely because (3) is so much weaker than the conjunction of (i), and (iii).

¹⁹ Following Weitz. See also the first chapter of Davies (1991).

- (5) If every aesthetic theory is false, then The Bold Claim is false.
- (6) If The Bold Claim is false, then The Hard Question has no answer.
- (7) Therefore, The Hard Question has no answer.

As I said in the introduction to this chapter, I see no satisfactory way to make sense of Artwork Destroyed and Toaster Destroyed except by accepting The Bold Claim and answering The Hard Question. For, without answering The Hard Question, the peculiar value of art must either be denied or remain mysterious. So I find the argument composed of statements (1)–(7) quite puzzling and think that we should accept anti-essentialism only as a last resort.

The argument, it must be noted, is logically valid. I am inclined to accept premises (1) and (2) for reasons that have already been given. Premises (5) and (6) strike me as too obvious to deny. The justification for premise (3) rests heavily on the case of The Devious Artist. And so the crucial question is this: does The Devious Artist actually support premise (3)?

My answer to this question has already been hinted at by some of what I have said above. I have been careful to say that The Devious Artist *seems* to refute every aesthetic theory, that it provides *prima facie reason* for thinking that every aesthetic theory is false, and that whatever it tells us about Bell's theory applies equally well to *virtually* every other aesthetic theory. The reason for these qualifications is just that I do not think that The Devious Artist or the considerations that arise from it *actually refute every* aesthetic theory.

In the next chapter, I will explain why. There I will argue that the argument composed of statements (1)–(7) is defective and that it is reasonable to think that some

aesthetic theory is true. To do this, I will have to explain why The Devious Artist does not present serious problems for all aesthetic theories.

2. Institutional Theories Of Art

2.0 Introduction

I have two objectives in this chapter. First, I want to explain why I think that anti-essentialism is false. Anti-essentialism, remember, is the claim that every aesthetic theory is false, where an aesthetic theory is a statement of the following form:

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x is F .

Second, I want to argue that the correct aesthetic theory—whatever that turns out to be—must be an instance of a more general schema: it must be what I will call, in basic keeping with George Dickie's terminology, an *institutional theory* of art.

I should say right from the outset that I will not go so far, in this or any subsequent chapter, as to offer a complete aesthetic theory of my own. Rather, I will say enough about what a true aesthetic theory would have to be like to allow me to offer what I think is a convincing argument against anti-essentialism.

Since I will not be offering a complete aesthetic theory, I will also not be offering a complete answer to The Hard Question:

What is the nature of art, that artworks should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?

A full answer to this question would require a fully spelled-out aesthetic theory.

Nevertheless, I think that what I say about the correct aesthetic theory—whatever that turns out to be—in this chapter will be enough to explain how to answer The Hard Question in chapter three.

2.1 Some Problems For Anti-Essentialism

It is useful to notice that anti-essentialism is a weaker claim than it may, at first, appear to be. Anti-essentialism says that every aesthetic theory is false. But consider the following sentence:

For all x that currently exist, if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x is F .

Call sentences like these *partial aesthetic theories*. Because of the restriction on the universal quantifier, partial aesthetic theories are not aesthetic theories, as I have been using the term. Aesthetic theories are supposed to cover all artworks, including those that have not yet been created and those that have long since been destroyed. So anti-essentialism, which says only that every aesthetic theory is false, does not tell us anything about whether some partial aesthetic theory is true.

Indeed, since there are only finitely many artworks that currently exist, there must be infinitely many F s such that any currently existing x is an artwork if and only if x is F . For example, we could make a finite list of all and only the artworks that currently exist and then define F as follows: for all x , x is F if and only if x is on the list. Or we could supplement that list by adding to it an impossible object—say, a triangular square—and then define F thus: for all x , x is F if and only if x is on the supplemented list. Or we could supplement the list again by adding another impossible object, etc. And it may even seem as though there may be some F such that all of the artworks that currently exist are artworks in virtue of the fact that they are F , even if anti-essentialism is true.

For example, we might be able to construct such an F as follows. Consider the (indexed) set, A , of artworks that currently exist and the (indexed) set V of facts in virtue

of which each of them is an artwork (so that V_n is the fact in virtue of which A_n is an artwork). If there are m elements of A , the following statement seems plausible:

For all x that currently exist, if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that V_0 and x is A_0 or V_1 and x is A_1 or ... or V_m and x is A_m .²⁰

This statement may seem like a plausible partial aesthetic theory. If so, even an anti-essentialist could accept it.

It may seem that this line of thought is mistaken and that the anti-essentialist should claim that there can be no true partial aesthetic theory. For suppose that I develop a partial aesthetic theory according to which something that currently exists counts as an artwork in virtue of the fact that it is F . Now consider the aesthetic theory according to which, for all x , x counts as an artwork in virtue of the fact that x is F . According to the arguments given in favor of anti-essentialism in chapter one, a devious artist could always create a counter-example to this aesthetic theory by creating an artwork that is not F . It may seem that such a counter-example would be sufficient to show not only that the aesthetic theory is false but also that the corresponding partial aesthetic theory is false.

After all, it may seem that to say of something that it is an artwork but that it is not F is to

²⁰ This statement may strike you as immediately problematic. It might be denied that anything is ever the case in virtue of a disjunction. Suppose that something is jade if and only if it is jadeite or nephrite. Then perhaps (i) every piece of jade is jade either in virtue of being jadeite or in virtue of being nephrite, but (ii) nothing is jade in virtue of the fact that it is either jadeite or nephrite. If so, I can define a new relation, the *in virtue** of relation: x is F in virtue* of p or q if and only if x is F in virtue of p or x is F in virtue of q . I can then define *aesthetic theories** and *partial aesthetic theories** in terms of the in virtue* of relation. Since all the important points from chapter one apply equally to aesthetic theories and aesthetic theories*, I could rewrite everything up to this point in terms of aesthetic theories* and the in virtue* of relation. But this strikes me as pedantic, and I will ignore such technicalities in what follows.

concede that something can be an artwork without being *F*, which is, in turn, to concede that the thing's being *F* is not that in virtue of which it is an artwork.

However, this is no reason for the anti-essentialist to deny that there could be true partial aesthetic theories. After all the (supposed) fact that there is no *F* in virtue of which all artworks are artworks does not entail that there are no *F*, *G*, and *H*, such that, for every *x*, if *x* is an artwork *x* is an artwork in virtue of being *F* or in virtue of being *G* or in virtue of being *H*.²¹

Happily, it is at least a bit odd for the anti-essentialist to think that there could be correct partial aesthetic theories but no correct aesthetic theory. Remember, anti-essentialism was motivated largely on the basis of the fact that the linguistic and artistic community is a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork. We usually know which things are artworks and which things are not. But there is no reason to think that any current partial aesthetic theory should tell us whether or why the next new creation is an artwork. If we can never have true aesthetic theories and must, instead, be content with partial aesthetic theories, why should we be reliable guides to whether the next new creation is an artwork, since our current partial aesthetic theories will have nothing to say about it? Doesn't our ability to recognize new artworks reliably seem a bit like magic?

In response to this thought, the anti-essentialist can appeal to the idea that "artwork" is an open term: the linguistic and artistic community does not discover, but rather decides, which things are artworks. However, if the linguistic and artistic community decides which things are artworks, then artworks are artworks, at least in part,

²¹ This may make anti-essentialism uninteresting. As noted, we could simply define an *in virtue* of* relation so that *x* is an artwork in virtue* of being *F* or *G* or *H*.

because of decisions made by the linguistic and artistic community. But this makes it seem as though the following is a plausible aesthetic theory (and not merely a plausible partial aesthetic theory):

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that the linguistic and artistic community has decided or would decide to refer to it with the word “artwork” or some synonym.²²

But the anti-essentialist cannot accept this or any other aesthetic theory on pain of inconsistency.

Perhaps the anti-essentialist can claim that the decisions of the artistic and linguistic community are not the whole story. Perhaps these decisions explain in part—but not in full—why artworks are artworks. But then the anti-essentialist must go on to say that there is no whole story. For, if there were a whole story, then some aesthetic theory could, at least in principle, say what that story was. However, if there is no whole story about why something is an artwork, then the anti-essentialist must explain in what sense the decisions of the linguistic community could possibly be a part of the story.

And there is a more pressing issue. If no fact ever really explains why artworks are artworks, then which things are artworks must either be a completely basic metaphysical fact or, alternatively, be quite an arbitrary matter. But, on the one hand, if our linguistic decisions factor into why something is an artwork, then which things are artworks cannot be completely basic. And, on the other hand, if the artistic and linguistic community does not use the word “artwork” arbitrarily, we could never hope to use it to

²² It is important to allow for the use of synonyms. Otherwise, the existence of artworks would depend, ridiculously, on the existence of English speakers.

communicate with each other. Since the linguistic and artistic community is a reliable guide concerning which things are artworks, and since the anti-essentialist explains this fact in terms of linguistic decisions made on the part of that community, the fact that we use the “artwork” to communicate with each other militates against the idea that which things are artworks is either an arbitrary matter or a completely basic metaphysical fact. And this, in turn, suggests that there is an explanation of why artworks are artworks, which, in turn, suggests that some aesthetic theory must be true. The fact that the linguistic community does not use “artwork” arbitrarily is a serious problem for the anti-essentialist.

2.2 Defining “Artwork” Recursively

Some thoughts in the spirit of Frank Jackson can bolster the line of argument just considered.²³ The power of our brains is limited. Our brains contain a limited number of neurons, each of which transmits biochemical signals at a limited rate. Consequently, our brains can perform only a limited number of tasks in any given period of time. So, whenever we decide to classify something with the word “artwork,” our decisions are determined by the performance of a limited number of tasks by our brains. Since our everyday use of “artwork” is non-arbitrary (and, in fact, since our brains perform finitely many tasks), the tasks our brains perform when we decide whether to classify something

²³ See, for instance, Jackson (1998: 60–7). The discussion there is complicated by considerations related to a suspicious variety of two-dimensional semantics (ibid: 28–55), which I reject for reasons discovered by Kripke (1980) and driven home by Soames (2005). The argument I appeal to here is, so far as I can tell, completely independent of Jackson’s two-dimensionalism.

with the word “artwork” must conform to some general rule or pattern, presumably a very complex one. And, since our brains are limited in their capacities, this general rule or pattern must itself be of limited, though perhaps very great, complexity; otherwise, we would never be able to learn how to use the word “artwork.” So there is some specifiable rule or pattern that our use of “artwork” conforms to, even if it’s very complex. Call this rule or pattern *r*.

Now consider the following aesthetic theory:

For all *x*, if *x* is an artwork, *x* is an artwork in virtue of the fact that enough members of the linguistic and artistic community have decided, in conformity with *r*, to classify *x* with the word “artwork” or some synonym.²⁴

Suppose that “artwork” is an open term, so that the linguistic and artistic community decides, rather than discovers, whether a given thing is an artwork. Then the linguistic and artistic community is a reliable guide to whether something is an artwork. Moreover, the linguistic and artistic community is reliable because its decisions determine which things are artworks. But I have already argued (in chapter one) that “artwork” is an open

²⁴ Worries about disjunctions and the “in virtue of” relation, raised in footnote 1, do not apply to this statement, even though *r* may be disjunctive. There is no obvious difficulty with something’s being the case in virtue of conformity with a disjunctive rule. Think of chess. On my opening move, I am free to advance a pawn one square or two. Suppose I advance a pawn two squares. If my move is legal, it is legal in virtue of the fact that it follows a rule governing the moving of pawns in chess. The rule in question is disjunctive and my move is in accordance with the rule in virtue of the fact that it satisfies one disjunct. Nevertheless, it is in virtue of the fact that my move is in accordance with a disjunctive rule—not in virtue of a disjunction—that it counts as a legal move in chess.

term. So here it seems that we have a plausible aesthetic theory and a potential counterexample to anti-essentialism.

One feature of this aesthetic theory is important to note. It does not say that something is an artwork just because people use the word “artwork” to refer to it. Suppose I see an aardvark and, through a slip of the tongue, say, “Look at the artwork.” Suppose that due to some cosmic coincidence every English speaker who sees this particular aardvark has a similar slip of the tongue. Even if a significant chunk of the linguistic community refers to the aardvark as an artwork and no one refers to it otherwise, the aesthetic theory under consideration does not say that the aardvark is an artwork. The reason for this is that we do not decide to have particular slips of the tongue. Moreover, slips of the tongue do not conform to the rules and patterns that govern our use of language; that’s why they’re slips. So the aesthetic theory under consideration does not say that the aardvark is an artwork. In order for it to say that something is an artwork, language users would have to decide to call it an artwork and their decisions would have to conform to whatever rule or pattern governs the use of the word “artwork.”

The time has come to examine the argument (from chapter one) in favor of anti-essentialism more carefully. The crucial premise in that argument, remember, was this:

The Crucial Premise

If “artwork” is an open term, and if the artistic community often accepts things as artworks because of what they show us about the nature of art, then every aesthetic theory is false.

The Crucial Premise was supported on the basis of a thought experiment, The Devious Artist, that went basically like this: Suppose that according to some plausible aesthetic

theory, *T*, something counts as an artwork if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, it is *F*. Then some devious artist might come along and create something that is similar to a wide range of accepted artworks in many respects but that nevertheless is not *F*. If so, we may consider the devious artist's work an artwork just because of what it reveals about the nature of art. If "artwork" is an open term, our collective judgment that something is an artwork is reliable; if we collectively judge something to be an artwork, then it is one. So—supposing that "artwork" is an open term and that we often accept things as artworks because of what they reveal about the nature of art—the devious artist's creation is a counterexample to *T*.

This argument rests on a crucial presupposition: for every possible *F*, a devious artist could create something that is not *F* but that is sufficiently like a range of accepted artworks so as to reveal something interesting about the nature of art. However, this presupposition is false. It would only be true if every possible *F* failed to take into account that something may be dubbed an artwork just because of the interesting ways in which it is related to a range of already-accepted artworks. But we can construct an *F* so as to refute this idea. We can construct *F* in such a way that a thing may be *F* just because of how it is related to other things that are *F*, i.e. to other artworks. But this means that The Devious Artist does not establish the truth of The Crucial Premise.²⁵ And this, in turn, means that the argument from chapter one in favor of anti-essentialism is defective.

²⁵ Danto very nearly realized this. See, in particular, 1984: 33–53.

The most straightforward way of constructing F so as to accommodate this insight is to define it recursively. We can let P be a set of paradigm artworks and then define a *candidate artwork* in terms of P and a yet-to-be-specified relation, R :

For all x , x is a candidate artwork if and only if $x \in P$ or there is some y such that y is a candidate artwork and x is R -related to y .

Now consider the following recursive aesthetic theory:

Recursive Aesthetic Theory

For all x , if x is an artwork, x is an artwork in virtue of the fact that x is a candidate artwork and enough members of the linguistic and artistic community have decided or would decide to classify x with the word “artwork” or some synonym.

If relation R is specified so as to conform to the ways that relations between new works by devious artists and already-accepted artworks contribute to language users’ decisions whether to classify new works with the word “artwork” (or some synonym), then there is no reason that rule or pattern r cannot be cashed out, in the manner just exhibited, in terms of candidate artworks. So, with R and P properly specified, Recursive Aesthetic Theory is both plausible and immune to the objections arising from the case of The Devious Artist.

Obviously, nothing I have said so far is terribly informative. Unless we know what P and R are, Recursive Aesthetic Theory does not really tell us anything about the nature of art. Still, I think it does show that anti-essentialism is on very shaky philosophical ground: there may well be a correct aesthetic theory. And since it seems to me that we ought to accept anti-essentialism only as a last resort, I am inclined to accept

tentatively that some aesthetic theory that has the form of Recursive Aesthetic Theory is correct. What remains is to see whether we can say enough about R and P to answer The Hard Question and to account for the peculiar value of art.

There are in the literature two basic types of aesthetic theories that have the form, or very nearly have the form, of Recursive Aesthetic Theory: institutional theories and *historical theories*. These two types of theories are parallel, or nearly parallel, in structure but differ in how they specify the set of paradigm artworks, P . Various institutional (or historical) theories differ from each other in how they each define relation R . I will not have much to say about relation R here. For the rest of this chapter I want to focus primarily on the set of paradigm artworks, P .

2.3 Institutional And Historical Theories Of Art

Scattered throughout museums, performance halls, and personal collections around the world, there are various things—paintings, sculptures, musical and dance performances, etc.—commonly accepted, and referred to, as artworks, that constitute the subject-matter of art history classes, of scholarly interpretation and criticism, and of various degrees of appreciation by the general public. These works include such things as Michelangelo's *Pieta*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Duchamp's readymades, and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. It is not the role of an aesthetic theory to determine whether such works really are artworks. We all know that they are and don't need philosophical

theories to tell us so. Good aesthetic theories should just accept that these things are artworks and help explain why they are artworks.²⁶

The simplest way in which an aesthetic theory might do this is to claim that some works—the paradigm artworks—are artworks just in virtue of the fact that they are generally referred to with the word “artwork;” are scattered throughout museums, performance halls, and personal collections around the world; and constitute the subject-matter of art history classes, of scholarly interpretation and criticism, and of various degrees of appreciation by the general public; etc. Such aesthetic theories are the institutional theories of art.

We can characterize institutional theories of art in the following way. Start with the relevant notion of a candidate artwork:

For all x , x is a candidate artwork if and only if x is a paradigm artwork (i.e., x plays a central role in our art-related practices and institutions; x is among the primary subject matter of art history scholarship, of critical interpretation and evaluation, and of various degrees of appreciation by the members of the general public) or there is some y such that y is a candidate artwork and x is R -related to y .

An institutional theory of art is an instance of Recursive Aesthetic Theory understood in terms of this notion of candidate artwork.

²⁶ This is not to deny that there may have been debate about whether these things were artworks when they were first made. Aesthetic theories may, of course, be useful in settling debates.

The simplest institutional theory of art is the one that takes relation R to be the identity relation. According to this theory, x is a candidate artwork if and only if x is a paradigm artwork, i.e., if and only if x plays the appropriate role in our art-related practices and institutions. Since these works are pretty much universally referred to by language users with the word “artwork” (or some synonym), this theory effectively says that x is an artwork if and only if x is a paradigm artwork, i.e., if and only if it plays the proper role in our art-related practices and institutions. This being the simplest institutional theory of art, it is not surprising that it was the first one to appear in the philosophical literature. Its primary advocate is Dickie.²⁷

Dickie’s particular institutional theory is subject to obvious criticism. It is overly restrictive because, according to it, any work that does not play the proper role in our art-related practices and institutions is not an artwork. Lost and forgotten paintings by Leonardo da Vinci do not count as artworks according to this theory because, having been lost and forgotten, they play no role whatsoever in our current art-related practices. However, not to count such works as artworks simply because they are lost seems like a mistake.

Historical theories of art were first developed, in part, in response to the idea that institutional theories of art are too restrictive to be plausible. Jerrold Levinson, for example, first argued for his historical theory partially on these grounds.²⁸ Historical theories of art differ from institutional theories of art in two important respects. First, historical theories require, for all works x and y such that x is R -related to y , that the

²⁷ 1974. See also 1983.

²⁸ 1979: 36.

creation of y chronologically precede the creation of x . Second, historical theories do not require paradigm artworks to play any role whatsoever in our current art-related practices or institutions.

For example, Levinson's historical theory defines the R -relation in terms of the intentions with which a work is created. Roughly speaking, according to his theory, x is R -related to y if and only if x 's creator creates x with the intention that x be appreciated in the ways that y is appreciated at the time of x 's creation or some prior time.²⁹ For instance, according to Levinson's historical theory, if I create a work with the intention that it be appreciated in the same way that T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is or has been appreciated, then my work is R -related to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. If I create my work with such an intention, and if Eliot's work is an artwork, then, according to Levinson, my work is a candidate artwork.

Supposing we have specified relation R and know which things at some time, t , are artworks, we can determine what the paradigm artworks are by determining which works (created prior to the creation of those things that are artworks at t) the artworks at time t are R -related to. We can then determine which works *those* are R -related to, and so on. When we, at last, come to works that are not R -related to anything (either because there are no earlier works or because there are no earlier works to which they stand in the right relation), we have discovered the paradigm artworks. Levinson calls these the *ur-arts*.³⁰ Since paradigm artworks, so conceived, may have been forgotten, lost, or destroyed long ago, historical theories of art, unlike institutional theories of art, do not

²⁹ Ibid: 37, 39, and 40.

³⁰ Ibid: 42.

necessarily require paradigm artworks to play any role at all in our current art-related practices.³¹

It should be pointed out briefly that historical theories of art do not require that all paradigm artworks be older than all other candidate artworks. Suppose that paradigm artwork p_1 was created at time t_1 and paradigm artwork p_2 was created at time t_2 (later than t_1). Then there may be a work, w , created at time t_3 , such that w is R -related to p_1 and t_2 is later than t_3 , which is later than t_1 . In this case, w is a candidate artwork but is not a paradigm artwork, even though it is older than some paradigm artwork, p_2 .

2.4 Institutional Theories Vs. Historical Theories

I claim that institutional theories of art are superior to historical theories of art in every important respect. Three observations are in order on this point.

Here is the first observation: it may seem that the institutional theories of art comprise a proper subset of the historical theories of art, but they do not. It may seem, for instance, that institutional theories are just those historical theories that define the set of paradigm artworks in terms of our current art-related practices and institutions. This is not correct. Suppose there are two theories of art, a historical theory, H , and an institutional theory, I , both of which define relation R in precisely the same way, and both of which define the set of paradigm artworks, P , as containing all and only those works that play a role in our current art-related practices. Even though P and R are defined identically by each theory, H and I are different.

³¹ Calling them paradigms may, as a result, be slightly misleading. I hope that no confusion results.

To illustrate, consider the following case:

New Discovery

One afternoon, while on an archaeological expedition, Digger Pothunter discovers something that looks like an artwork but that is older than any known artwork. Since the object has just been discovered, it has never played any role at all in current art-related practices. After Digger's discovery becomes more widely known, but before it begins to play any significant role in our art-related practices, everyone who knows about it begins referring to it with the word "artwork."

Is Digger's discovery actually an artwork? Well, *H* would include it as a candidate artwork—a paradigm artwork, even—as long as there were some other artwork *R*-related to it. By contrast, *I* would not include Digger's discovery as a paradigm artwork, since it does not play the appropriate role in our art-related practices. By hypothesis, Digger's discovery cannot be *R*-related to anything but works that are older than it. However, no known artworks are older than Digger's discovery. This means that Digger's discovery is not a candidate artwork according to *I*. So, if there is some artwork *R*-related to Digger's discovery, then, once language users begin to refer to Digger's discovery as an artwork, *H* and *I* disagree about whether it is an artwork. New Discovery shows that *H* and *I* are different theories.

Here is the second observation: for any historical theory, *H*, that correctly identifies as artworks those works that institutional theories take to be paradigm artworks—for any plausible historical theory of art—there are institutional theories that identify exactly the same objects as artworks that *H* does. If *H* defines artworks in terms

of relation R_H and set P_H , we can define one such institutional theory, I , in terms of relation R_I and set P_I as follows. First, define P_I in the ordinary way. Second, create a list (set), L , of all and only works that currently exist that are, according to H , artworks but that are not elements of P_I . Third, define an *ancestor* thus: for all x and y , y is an ancestor of x if and only if x is R_H -related to y or some ancestor of x is R_H -related to y . Fourth, define relation R_I as follows: for all x and y , x is R_I -related to y if and only if (i) $y \in P_I$ and $x \in L$ or (ii) $y \in P_I \cup L$ and x is an ancestor of y or (iii) $y \in P_I \cup L$ and y is an ancestor of x . Defined in this way, H and I identify precisely the same works as artworks, albeit for different reasons.

This is enough to show that some of the original philosophical motivation behind historical theories of art rests on a mistake, i.e. the mistaken assumption that any institutional theory of art will be overly restrictive. Even given that Dickie's particular aesthetic theory is too restrictive to be plausible, less restrictive institutional theories of art can be defined by specifying relation R as something other than the identity relation. In fact, as was just shown, institutional theories are not, in general, any more restrictive than historical theories are.

Here is the third observation: there is no way, in general, to determine what belongs to the set of paradigm artworks according to any historical theory of art unless we can first determine, independently of the historical theory in question, which things are artworks at some time t . Consequently, historical theories of art can be of no use in identifying which things are artworks at t , on pain of circularity. Even after we have identified everything that is an artwork at t , historical theories still do not help to determine what belongs to the set of paradigm artworks unless we can first specify

relation R . So while historical theories define “artwork” in terms of paradigm artworks, they only allow us to determine which things are paradigm artworks given that we can both specify relation R and reliably identify which things are artworks at t , without making any reference to the paradigms in terms of which such works are classified as artworks. This disanalogy between the central role that paradigm artworks play in defining “artwork” and the virtually nonexistent role they play in helping us to identify artworks is a very unsatisfying feature of historical theories of art. It strongly suggests that, even if some historical theory should correctly identify artworks, it would do so for the wrong reasons.

By contrast, institutional theories of art require us to be able to identify pre-theoretically as artworks only the paradigm artworks in terms of which all other artworks are defined. There is no disanalogy in institutional theories between the role that paradigm artworks play in defining “artwork” and the role that paradigm artworks play in identifying artworks as artworks. In this respect, institutional theories are more satisfying than historical theories. Moreover, we need not, according to institutional theories, have any idea what relation R is in order to identify the paradigm artworks. R helps to identify only other candidate artworks. Institutional theories are, in this respect, less demanding of us than historical theories are.

Since, (i) the original philosophical motivation behind historical theories of art rests partly on a misunderstanding of institutional theories; (ii) for every plausible historical theory of art, there is an institutional theory that identifies precisely the same things as artworks that the historical theory does, but for different reasons; (iii) it is doubtful that historical theories identify artworks as artworks for the right reasons; (iv)

institutional theories are more satisfying than historical theories in their use of paradigm artworks; and (v) institutional theories are less demanding of us than historical theories are; there is no good reason, so far as I can see, to define art in historical terms.

Institutional theories of art are preferable to historical theories of art in every important respect.

A similar line of argument applies to any theory of art, T , that is not institutional but that, as an instance of Recursive Aesthetic Theory, defines “artwork” recursively in terms of a paradigm set, P_T , a relation, R_T , and a corresponding notion of candidate artworks. Let I be an institutional theory defined in terms of set P_I and relation R_I . In order for T to be plausible, it must classify the elements of P_I as artworks. There are two ways in which T might do this. First, P_I might be a proper subset of P_T . If so, (i) I is less demanding of us than T is in the sense that it requires us to be able, pre-theoretically, to identify fewer artworks as artworks than T requires us to be able to identify, and (ii) I is more parsimonious than T in the sense that it defines “artwork” in terms of a smaller set of paradigms. Second, there may be elements of P_I that are not elements of P_T but that are R_T -related to other artworks (as identified by T). If so, there is a disanalogy between the way that we, in point of fact, identify elements of P_I as artworks (viz., by noticing the roles they play in our art-related practices) and the fact in virtue of which they are artworks according to T (namely by being R_T -related to more fundamental paradigm cases). T then runs the risk of identifying many artworks as artworks for the wrong reasons. So there is reason to prefer institutional theories of art to any other aesthetic theory that defines “artwork” recursively in terms of paradigm cases.

Since (i) there is reason to prefer institutional theories of art to other versions of Recursive Aesthetic Theory; (ii) Recursive Aesthetic Theory is the most straightforward answer to the arguments given in favor of anti-essentialism in chapter one; and (iii) Recursive Aesthetic Theory is plausible; there is reason to prefer institutional theories of art to all other aesthetic theories. None of this completely rules out the possibility that some theory, better than any institutional theory, could be forthcoming. However, I have no idea what such a theory would be like and, consequently, I feel justified by the arguments I've given in focusing exclusively on institutional theories of art from here on out.

2.5 Looking Forward

In this chapter I have argued, negatively, against anti-essentialism. I have done this by arguing, positively, in favor of institutional theories of art. However, there are serious difficulties that any institutional theory of art must overcome. Aren't institutional theories of art circular? They define art in terms of art-related institutions and practices. What are art-related institutions and practices but those institutions and practices that are concerned with art? Weren't there artworks before there were any art institutions? Aren't there still artworks being produced in cultures that lack any art institutions? And what about The Hard Question? Why should the fact that something is appropriately related to a particular institution help to account for its peculiar value?

Any reasonable defense of institutional theories of art must answer such questions. I will attempt to offer such a defense in the next chapter.

3. Answering Objections, Answering The Hard Question

3.0 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued in favor of institutional theories of art. Remember, an institutional theory of art is, roughly, an aesthetic theory according to which artworks count as artworks in virtue of either being appropriately related to art institutions and other art-related practices or being appropriately related to other artworks. In this chapter, I wish to consider and respond to what I take to be the most serious potential objections to institutional theories of art.

In defending institutional theories of art, I have two main goals. First, I want to put to rest many lingering doubts that opponents of such theories surely have. Second, I want to make it clear how institutional theories of art allow us to answer a question that I raised in chapter one:

The Hard Question

What is the nature of art, that artworks should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?

I think that this question can be answered, and that institutional theories of art provide a satisfactory framework in which to answer it.

This chapter will conclude my argument for institutional theories of art. I will, by the end of this chapter, have argued positively in favor of institutional theories, have fended off serious objections to such theories, and have shown how such theories allow us to answer a vexing question about art, The Hard Question. Once this chapter is completed, I will take it for granted in what follows that some institutional theory of art is, in fact, the correct aesthetic theory.

3.1 Circularity

One immediate worry about any institutional theory of art is the evident potential for circularity.³² It is natural to think of art history as the branch of history concerned with art, to think of art museums and performance halls as buildings in which artworks are displayed and performed, and to think of art critics as people who professionally interpret and evaluate works of art. But if these and other art-related institutions and practices are defined in terms of art—as it is natural enough to think—then there can be no real hope of defining art in terms of these practices and institutions.³³

This worry can be answered. To start, it will be useful to point out just how much proponents of institutional theories of art can agree with their opponents, without running into any circularity. To make things easier, let's focus on a single claim: art history is the branch of history concerned with art. Proponents of institutional theories of art can agree with this claim. Indeed, institutional theories of art explain why it is true (and even why it is true as a matter of definition). It is true, according to institutional theories of art, because paradigm artworks are, by definition, those things that are, *inter alia*, the primary subject matter of art history.

³² See, in particular, Wollheim (1980: 157–66), who raises many of the issues considered here.

³³ This worry can be avoided entirely by taking institutional theories of art to characterize artworks rather than to define “artwork.” It is unproblematic to think that artworks are characteristically related to an art world and that the art world is characteristically concerned with art. But I am interested in arguing that art counts as art in virtue of its relation to the art world, in which case the art world cannot count as an art world in virtue of its concern with art (even if it can be characterized that way). Thanks to Andrew Huddleston for helpful discussions on this point.

Opponents of institutional theories might claim that this is not enough. They might claim that an object's being a work of art often factors into the best explanation of why art history is concerned with it. But proponents of institutional theories can agree with this as well. For suppose we have defined the set of paradigm artworks, P , and the relation, R , that non-paradigm artworks stand in to other works of art. Let x and y be two well known objects such that $x \in P$, $y \notin P$, y is R -related to x , x and y are both commonly referred to as artworks, and y has, for one reason or another, been completely neglected by the art-history community. An art historian, noticing that y is an artwork that is interestingly related to x (which, we may suppose, already figures prominently in her scholarly work) may take a professional interest in y just because it is an artwork that stands in an interesting relation to another artwork of interest. In this case, y 's becoming the subject matter of art historical research can best be accounted for by appealing to, among other things, y 's status as an artwork.

But perhaps opponents of institutional theories will insist that this is still not enough. Perhaps they wish to claim that the fact that an object is an artwork may factor into the best explanation of why art history is concerned with it, even in the case of paradigm artworks. Again, proponents of institutional theories can agree. For suppose, as above, that $x \in P$, $y \notin P$, y is R -related to x , x and y are both commonly referred to as artworks, and y has, for one reason or another, been completely neglected by the art-history community. And suppose, as above, that an art historian takes serious scholarly interest in y because, among other things, it is an artwork. If her scholarly work is sufficiently well accepted by other art historians, then y may become the subject of a considerable body of work, both historical and critical, and may, given enough interest,

begin to be displayed prominently in important exhibitions in museums throughout the world. If so, then y will become a paradigm artwork whose status as an artwork factors into the best explanation of why art historians are concerned with it. More interestingly, y will be a paradigm artwork whose newly acquired status as a paradigm artwork is best explained by appealing to, among other things, its independent status as an artwork.

In fact, proponents of institutional theories of art can—at least in principle—even go so far as to claim that something's being an artwork factors into the best explanation of why art history is concerned with it in the case of every current work of art. Suppose that, from time t_1 to time t_2 (later than t_1), x and y are the only two artworks that exist. At t_1 , $x \in P$, $y \notin P$, y is R -related to x , x is R -related to y , x and y are both commonly referred to as artworks, and y has been completely neglected by the art history community. As above, over time, y becomes a paradigm artwork. However, for one reason or another, interest in x decreases as interest in y increases. After a while, x no longer plays any role whatsoever in the art world and is no longer a paradigm artwork. Still, x is interestingly related to y , which is a paradigm artwork. One day an art historian becomes interested in x , after which it begins again to play a role in the art world and eventually regains its status as a paradigm artwork. The result is that, at t_2 , there are two paradigm artworks and each of their statuses as an artwork factors into the best explanations of why they are each the subject of art-historical work.

Given that proponents of institutional theories of art can consistently claim (i) that art history is the branch of history concerned with art; (ii) that this is true by definition; (iii) that sometimes something's being the subject of art-historical research is best explained by appealing to its status as an artwork; and (iv) that this may, in principle, be

true of every artwork, including the paradigms; it seems that not much is at stake in whether we define “art history” (or “art criticism” or “art museum” or whatever) in terms of “art” or vice versa.

Perhaps institutional theories of art commit one to the view that sometimes an artwork’s status as an artwork does not factor into the best explanation for why art history is concerned with it. Otherwise where did the paradigms originally come from? However, this does not seem like much of a bullet for proponents of institutional theories to bite. After all, an artwork may become the concern of art historical research for a plethora of reasons, some of which may have nothing to do with its actually being an artwork. For example, some art historian may take an interest in something that she mistakenly believes to be an artwork. If her interest spreads among the art world, the object in question will become a paradigm artwork, despite the fact that the art historian who initially took interest in it was mistaken about its status as a work of art.

The fact is that an object may begin to play a central role in our art-related practices and institutions for various historical, sociological, or aesthetic reasons that do not, on their own, make it count as an artwork. A work may occupy a central role in our historical and critical practice, for instance, because it is strikingly beautiful (*Romeo and Juliet* or the *Pieta*), it has exerted a great influence on subsequent works (*Brillo Boxes* or Manet’s *Olympia*), its creator or owner was quite famous (Jennifer Lopez’s green Versace dress), it reflected certain ideals that were prevalent at the time and place of its creation (the Homeric epics or Rockwell’s paintings or Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*), it is so weird that no one knows just how to respond to it but by making it the subject of thoughtful criticism and interpretation (Duchamp’s *Fountain*), etc.

According to institutional theories of art, such historical, sociological, and aesthetic facts may factor into the best explanation of how something comes to play a central role in our critical practices but are, nevertheless, not generally the facts in virtue of which something counts as an artwork. Rather, something counts as an artwork in virtue of the role it plays in certain practices and institutions,³⁴ regardless of what the best explanation for why it plays that role is. And this seems to count in favor of institutional theories of art much more than it counts against them. After all, it is easy to see how something could be beautiful, original, influential, weird, or expressive of cultural norms without being a work of art.

3.2 What's So Special About Art Institutions?

So far so good. But there is still a serious threat of circularity. After all, what are art institutions? What are art-related practices? Proponents of institutional theories of art owe us an explanation of what art-institutions and art-related practices are that makes no reference to the fact that such practices and institutions are concerned with art. Otherwise circularity is unavoidable.

The problem here can be made clear by considering other sorts of practices and institutions. For example, think of the practices and institutions surrounding sports. There are sports museums, sports magazines, sports writers, sports performances, etc. We criticize sports, evaluate them, praise and critique people who participate in them, discuss

³⁴ It may be the case that the reasons for which paradigm artworks come to play central roles in our art-related practices are what distinguish art-related institutions and practices from other institutions and practices that are, in other respects, similar to them.

their aesthetic features, and occasionally discuss what they can tell us about cultural norms (as when the FIFA Women's World Cup is much less popular in the United States than the men's counterpart, despite the fact that the American women's team is much better than the American men's team). Indeed, it may seem as though the only important difference between the institutions and practices surrounding sports and those surrounding art is that the former surround sports and the latter surround art. But proponents of institutional theories of art cannot accept this, on pain of circularity.

What, then, is the difference between a sports institution and an art institution? And, if no real difference can be found, isn't the proponent of institutional theories of art committed to thinking—ridiculously—that sports (or at least the ones that play a major role in sports institutions) are paradigm works of art?

I should note in passing that the similarities between art and sports are a problem for other theories of art than the institutional ones. Denis Dutton's favored theory of art utterly fails to distinguish between art and sports, as he himself notes.³⁵ Perhaps proponents of institutional theories of art can simply point out that art is, in the final analysis, very difficult to distinguish from sports and hope to show that proponents of other plausible theories of art face the same problem.

It would be unfortunate if this were the best that could be done. Fortunately, we can do better. To see how, a bit of technical vocabulary will be useful. Let's call the various features of an object that explain why it plays a major role in various practices and institutions the work's *selection criteria*. As noted in the previous section, an

³⁵ 2009: 62–3.

artwork's selection criteria can encompass a wide range of sociological, historical, and aesthetic facts.

Now, two facts about selection criteria are worth mentioning. First, as has already been noted, an artwork's selection criteria are not, in general, what makes it count as a work of art according to institutional theories of art. In general, an artwork counts as a work of art because of the role it plays in art institutions or because of the ways in which it is related to other works, regardless of what its selection criteria are. Second, many artworks have the same, or very similar, selection criteria as each other. For example, many paradigm artworks have come to play central roles in our art institutions because they are very beautiful artifacts that were, or seem to have been, created, at least in part, for the purpose of providing aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, the history of aesthetics is littered with false aesthetic theories that mistakenly take various works' selection criteria as the defining features of art³⁶—a mistake that is only tempting because so many works have so many selection criteria in common.

The important thing to realize is that, even though proponents of institutional theories of art must insist that artworks do not, in general, count as artworks in virtue of their selection criteria, they may very well claim that the most common selection criteria of paradigm artworks allow us to distinguish between art-related institutions and other sorts of institutions.

Think again of sports institutions. Sports institutions tend to focus on competitive activities that require dexterity and athleticism. Most sports are—and have been a

³⁶ It is worth noting on the point the list compiled by Weitz (1956: 410 ff.).

primary focus of sports writing, sports television, and professional sports leagues because they are—competitive activities that require dexterity and athleticism. Nevertheless, many sports do not meet this description. For example, NASCAR though competitive, does not require athleticism. Presumably, sports writers and networks began to focus much of their resources and attention on NASCAR for financial reasons. Since NASCAR is popular, there is a market for television networks and sports magazines to make a profit on covering it. So NASCAR has come to play a major role in sports institutions despite the fact that it does not share the selection criteria of more traditional sports, such as soccer, tennis, and basketball. If NASCAR is a sport—and I see no reason to deny that it is—it shows that the traditional selection criteria that many or most sports share are not genuinely characteristic of sports. But even if NASCAR is not a sport, it is easy to see that it plays a major role in sports institutions, even without providing a general account of what it is for something to be a sport. NASCAR plays a major role in those institutions that have traditionally focused on activities that meet the selection criteria most sports have in common: competitiveness, dexterity, and athleticism.

Art institutions, by way of stark contrast, have not historically focused on competitive activities that require dexterity and athleticism. They have focused on beautiful human artifacts that are, or seem to have been, created, at least in part, to provide aesthetic pleasure. This is not to say that all artworks share the same selection criteria. Nor is it to say that all artworks share even some of the selection criteria that artworks have traditionally become the focus of our art institutions on the basis of. Rather, it is easy to see when a work comes to play a major role in an art institution, regardless of what its selection criteria are. It is easy because we know what art

institutions are even before we have a worked-out account of what art is. They are those institutions that have traditionally focused on beautiful human artifacts that were, or seem to have been, created for, among other purposes, providing aesthetic pleasure.

The traditional selection criteria of artworks are not truly characteristic of art because, as was noted in chapter one, many artworks do not share them. However, these selection criteria do allow us to distinguish art institutions from other institutions. This, I take it, is all that is required for proponents of institutional theories of art to stave off any lingering doubts about the circularity of their theories.³⁷

3.3 But Other People Have Art Too

Still, opponents of institutional theories of art may object on other grounds. They may object that institutional theories of art cannot be correct because art exists in times, places, and cultures that art institutions (and many other art-related practices) do not exist in. But if artworks count as artworks, in the first instance, only because of relations they stand in to art institutions, how can this be? Shouldn't a culture with no art institutions be a culture with no paradigm artworks and, as result, a culture with no artworks at all?

Proponents of institutional theories of art have a ready answer to these questions. They can claim that artworks from cultures, times, or places with no art institutions are

³⁷ We can consistently say that (1) *x* plays a role in our art institutions because of its beauty and that (2) *x* is an artwork because of its role in our art institutions without saying that (3) *x* is an artwork because of its beauty. The “because” in (1) refers to the reasons for which people decide to include something in a particular set of institutions. The “because” in (2) refers to that in virtue of which something is an artwork. Even if “because” is often used transitively, in this case it refers to two different types of explanations and cannot rightly be used transitively.

artworks for the same reasons that other accepted artworks are: they are related, in the appropriate ways, either to those same institutions that other paradigm artworks are related to or to other artworks that are related in the appropriate ways to those very institutions. The fact that the relevant institutions do not exist in all times, places, and cultures that have art is not important. What matters is that (1) those institutions do exist in this time, this place, and this culture and (2) artworks from other times, places, and cultures play the appropriate roles within them.

Consider, for example, the artworks exhibited at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art that come from cultures—such as ancient North America—that, as far as we know, did not have art museums, professional art critics, art historians, or many of the other institutions and practices that are characteristic of the art world. According to institutional theories of art, these works are artworks regardless of facts about the culture they come from. Indeed, they are paradigm artworks. They are paradigm artworks for the same reason that the *Mona Lisa* is: they play central roles in our current art-related institutions and practices.

But what about the thousands or millions of North American art-like artifacts that were lost or destroyed, never to play any role at all in our current art institutions? Why should they not be artworks simply because we do not know about them?

Again, there is a ready answer. Lost works of centuries-old North American artists need be no different, from the point of view institutional theories of art, from lost and forgotten works of Pablo Picasso or Vincent Van Gogh. In neither case do the works in question play any role in our institutions and practices. But we have already seen, in chapter two, how institutional theories of art can count lost and forgotten works as

artworks. They are artworks, assuming that they are, because of the ways in which they are or were related to other works of art. There is no good reason, so far as I can see, why the same thing might not be said of lost or destroyed works from cultures, times, or places that lack art institutions.

Proponents of institutional theories of art need to be overly worried about the fact that artworks have been produced in many different cultures, times, and places. They can easily account for this fact.

3.4 But Other People Have The Concept Of Art Too

Perhaps there is something dissatisfying about the claims I put forward in the previous section. Perhaps it seems ethnocentric to claim that paradigm artworks from other times, places, and cultures only count as artworks because of the ways in which they are related to current, predominantly Western art institutions and art-related practices. Why think that the very notion of art is modern or Western? Isn't this just prejudice?

Well, it is not merely prejudice if the concept of art really is modern and Western. But what if it isn't? Dutton has recently argued that people from other times, places, and cultures not only produce art but also share our concept of art.³⁸ If he is right, institutional theories of art are in serious trouble. For if people from cultures with no art institutions nevertheless understand the artworks they produce as artworks, then art institutions can hardly explain why paradigm artworks are artworks. Otherwise, people from cultures

³⁸ 2009: 64–84.

without art institutions would have to understand their own artworks in terms of relations to foreign institutions, which they often do not even know exist. This is impossible. So, if Dutton is right, institutional theories of art are both ethnocentric and wrong.

Of course, I think that Dutton is mistaken. The weakness of his view can best be seen by looking at the arguments he gives in support of it. His argumentative strategy is entirely negative. He hopes to show that his opponents—those who, like me, claim that people from many other times, places, and cultures do not share our (modern, Western) concept of art—have consistently failed to make a compelling case.

Dutton focuses primarily on anthropologists rather than philosophers.³⁹ As he says, “If art is not a [...] concept confined to our culture [...] we would expect to see evidence of this in the work of anthropologists over the last century.”⁴⁰ However, as he admits, anthropologists from the last half-century have tended to see non-Western cultures as not having a concept of art.⁴¹ Dutton faces this difficulty head-on by arguing that recent anthropologists have misunderstood matters, either by misunderstanding the cultures they study or by misunderstanding the very concept of art that they claim is absent from those cultures.⁴²

I do not claim to know whether Dutton is right about the state of contemporary anthropology and I am happy to concede the point to him. Let us grant that

³⁹ I say “primarily” because Dutton does engage briefly with Danto. His criticism is bizarre, and I will not have anything to say about it: he essentially accuses Danto of being ethnocentric in what he says about imaginary people from his own thought experiments (Ibid: 82–4)

⁴⁰ Ibid: 64.

⁴¹ Ibid: 64–5.

⁴² Ibid.

anthropologists are confused, both about the cultures they study and about the concept of art. Let us suppose that the evidence they have mustered in support of the view that people from non-Western cultures do not have the concept of art is inadequate. Let us suppose that Dutton understands both art and anthropology better than the anthropologists do. What then?

Even granting Dutton all of that, there is no reason, so far as I can see, for thinking that people from very different times, places, and cultures—cultures that lack any acquaintance with art institutions (as I have characterized them above)—have the concept of art. From the fact that anthropologists have failed to make a compelling case for their view, it does not follow that their view is incorrect. Rather, to argue that people from cultures lacking any acquaintance with art institutions do have a concept of art, Dutton would have to do a good deal more than poke holes in other people's arguments. He would have to explicate the concept of art and then show evidence that people with no art institutions have that concept. However, if my view about art is correct—if the concept of art is institutional—Dutton could not hope to provide such evidence. Rather, before searching for evidence that people from very different cultures have the concept of art, Dutton would first have to argue, on independent grounds, that institutional theories of art are false. Without making such an independent argument, he could never establish, even in principle, that cultures lacking any acquaintance with art institutions have the concept of art.

Are there philosophically interesting, independent reasons for rejecting institutional theories of art? I have already dealt with the most compelling ones I know of. And so, as far as I can see, Dutton's claim that cultures with no art institutions

nevertheless have a concept of art does not pose a genuine threat to institutional theories of art. He, like the anthropologists he picks on, simply has not made his case.

More can be said. There are some cultures about which we can be fairly sure both that they produce artworks and that they lack a concept of art. I have foremost in mind the ancient Greeks. That the concept of art is not ancient, but quite recent, has been pointed out repeatedly—most famously and extensively by R. G. Collingwood,⁴³ more recently and more succinctly by Noël Carroll.⁴⁴ Suffice it say that Greek discussions of various things that we consider art—lyric poetry, epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, sculpture, etc.—tend to be conducted either in terms of narrow genres⁴⁵ or in terms of one of three more general ideas or concepts, none of which is the concept of art: *mimêsis* (imitation),⁴⁶ *technê* (skill or craft),⁴⁷ and the Muses.⁴⁸ That none of these ideas or concepts corresponds to the concept of art is obvious. *Mimêsis* is not (identical to) art because many artworks, including most musical works, are not imitative of anything. *Technê* is not (identical to) art because many skilled crafts, such as database programming, cobbling, and automotive repair, have little or nothing to do with the arts. And the Muses, while they inspire such arts as poetry and music, also inspire many other things, such as

⁴³ 1938: 15–41.

⁴⁴ 2009: 11–2.

⁴⁵ Among others, Aristotle (in the *Poetics*) and Demetrius (in *On Style*) discuss literature in terms of various genres.

⁴⁶ *Mimêsis* plays a major role in, among others', both Plato's (see, most especially, the *Republic* II and III) and Aristotle's (see, again, the *Poetics*) comments on art.

⁴⁷ Plato discusses artworks in terms of *technê* (again, most obviously in the *Republic* II and III).

⁴⁸ The close connection between artworks and the Muses is a central theme in Plato's *Ion* as well as in literary views expressed by Homer and Pindar (see the opening lines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as Pindar's *Olympian* 10).

history and memory, which are not among the arts. That none of the ancient Greek genres of art is identical to art as a whole is evident from the fact that none of them encapsulates even all of the art produced by the Greeks themselves.

Simply put, none of the concepts in terms of which the ancient Greeks discuss artworks matches, even approximately, the concept of art. The best explanation for this is that the Greeks do not have the concept of art, despite the fact that they create artworks and have many other concepts—such as *mimêsis*, *technê*, and various art genres—that are probably closely related to art.

Since there are cultures, like the ancient Greek culture, that produce artworks but have no concept of art, it seems unfair to charge proponents of institutional theories of art with ethnocentrism. Better to admit that the concept of art exists only in certain times, places, and cultures. Indeed, this is a major strength of institutional theories of art: they readily explain how it could be the case that people from a particular culture could produce many artworks without having the concept of art. So Dutton-style accusations of ethnocentrism do not seem to me to be a serious threat to institutional theories of art.

3.5 What About The Hard Question?

However, there is another way of charging proponents of institutional theories of art with ethnocentrism. As I argued in chapter one, it is natural to think of art as being peculiarly valuable. It is natural to think of an artwork as valuable, even when we know no more about it than that it is a work of art. And it is natural to think of artworks as being valuable in a way that many other things—such as money, toasters, trees, and people—are not. However, if a particular culture lacks the concept of art, the people from

that culture can hardly think that their artworks are valuable qua art. After all, they don't even think about their artworks as artworks. But it would be shocking if, for example, the ancient Greeks were unable to understand the value of their own artworks just because they did not think of those works in terms of foreign (to them) concepts. To suggest that the Greeks could not properly value their own artworks, but that we can, seems ethnocentric.

This returns us to where we began in chapter one:

The Hard Question

What is the nature of art, that artworks should be peculiarly valuable on account of it?

We can now see that proponents of institutional theories of art face an apparent dilemma with respect to The Hard Question. They can claim either (1) that art institutions have nothing to do with the value of art or (2) that art institutions help to account for the value of art. If they choose option (1), it seems that they lose the ability to answer The Hard Question. If they choose option (2), it seems that they will have difficulty explaining how people with no concept of art could ever understand the peculiar value of their own artworks.

I claim that proponents of institutional theories of art should respond to this apparent dilemma by opting for (2). They should answer the hard question by appealing to the institutional character of art and then argue that it is nevertheless possible to appreciate fully the value of artworks even if one does not, and cannot, think of those works in institutional terms.

The way to do this is by appealing to the selection criteria that characterize art institutions and that distinguish them from other institutions. Since art institutions are characterized by certain selection criteria, paradigm artworks tend to be those things that meet the criteria in question. They are typically beautiful, interesting, compelling, instructive, created to provide aesthetic pleasure, etc. What institutional theories of art guarantee is that the concept of art begins with paradigms and then branches out to other, related things, from there. As a result, the fact that something is an artwork is a *prima facie* reason to think that it either meets the selection criteria characteristic of art institutions or is appropriately related to other things that do. And since the selection criteria that characterize art institutions center on certain values—aesthetic pleasure, interestingness, beauty, etc.—the fact that something is an artwork is a *prima facie* reason to think that it instantiates certain values.

Selection criteria thus allow us to explain why we are often justified in thinking of artworks as valuable even when we know little about them. They allow us to account for why we are often justified in feeling that the loss or destruction of an artwork is a tragedy, even when we know little or nothing about the artwork in question. And since the selection criteria that characterize art institutions differ from those that characterize sports institutions or other sorts of institutions, they also allow us to explain why we are often justified in believing about an artwork that it is valuable in a distinctive or peculiar way, even when we know little or nothing about it beyond the fact that it is an artwork.

The selection criteria that characterize art institutions thus allow us to answer The Hard Question. The nature of art is institutional. The institutions and practices in terms of which art is defined are those that select, and have historically selected, objects for

inclusion on the basis of certain characteristic values. As a result, the fact that something is an artwork is a *prima facie* reason to suppose that it is valuable in a distinctive or peculiar way. This is not to say that good artworks are always—or even ever—valuable because they are artworks. They may only be valuable because they meet certain selection criteria. Nevertheless, understanding the nature of art allows us to understand the peculiar value of good artworks.

Notice that this way of answering The Hard Question does not commit one to the view that all artworks are valuable any more than it commits one to the view that artworks are valuable in virtue of the nature of art. This is a virtue of answering The Hard Question in terms of institutional theories of art. The simple fact is that many artworks are not particularly valuable. If it were in the nature of art to be valuable, this would be impossible.

Notice also that proponents of institutional theories of art can—indeed should—maintain that artworks often differ from each other in the ways in which they are valuable. Since the selection criteria that characterize art institutions span a broad range of sociological, historical, and aesthetic facts, different works can come to be focus of our art-related institutions and practices for a broad range of reasons. No wonder so many of them instantiate such different values.

It should now be clear why answering The Hard Question in institutional terms allows proponents of institutional theories of art to avoid the charge of ethnocentrism with which I began this section. To appreciate the value of an artwork, it is not usually necessary, on the institutional view, to recognize the role that it plays in art institutions. It is enough to recognize in the work those features or values—whatever they happen to

be—that qualify it for inclusion in art institutions, i.e. its selection criteria (if it is a paradigm artwork), or those of its features that explain its standing in the appropriate relation to paradigm artworks (if it is not a paradigm).⁴⁹ But if what I have said so far is correct, our understanding of the selection criteria that characterize art institutions must precede our understanding of art institutions. Indeed, it is in terms of those selection criteria that art institutions are differentiated from other sorts of institutions. Consequently, there is no obstacle preventing a person with no concept of art from appreciating the features of an artwork that explain why modern, Western cultures have granted it a major role in our art-related institutions and practices, even if they have no idea that there are such institutions and practices. There is nothing to prevent people from cultures with no concept of art from appreciating the value of their own artworks.

3.6 Looking Forward

My main objective up to this point has been to answer The Hard Question by saying something substantive about the nature of art. I now take myself to have done that. In order to do it, I have argued for institutional theories of art and have tried to defend such theories against what seem to me to be the most serious objections facing them. I have not offered a complete aesthetic theory of my own. Nor will I do so in what follows.

⁴⁹ Of course, sometimes, one must know quite a lot about art and art institutions before one is in a position to recognize what the selection criteria of a particular work are. The case of The Devious Artist, from chapter one, is relevant on this point. However, the fact that certain conceptual artworks can be appropriately valued only by people familiar with the institutions in terms of which they must be understood does not seem to me to be a problem for proponents of institutional theories of art.

However, I have tried to say enough about institutional theories of art to explain how they can help us to account for the peculiar value of artworks.

There are other peculiar features of artworks, beyond the fact that they are valuable in distinctive ways. Among these is the fact that artworks often are about things: they have meaning; they can be interpreted. Unfortunately, as I will argue in the next chapter, institutional theories of art do little to help us understand artistic meaning. It is to this issue that I now wish to turn.

4. Artworks, Institutions, And Intentions

4.0 Introduction

In the previous three chapters, I made a case for institutional theories of art and argued that understanding the nature of art in institutional terms allows us to understand why good artworks are peculiarly valuable. In this chapter, I want to begin consideration of another aspect of artworks—that they often have meaning, are about something, and can be interpreted—that institutional theories of art do considerably less to help us understand and account for.

My primary goal in this chapter is to introduce a popular and influential theory concerning the meaning and interpretation of artworks:

Intentionalism

What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends⁵⁰ to communicate by creating it.

There have been many different versions of this view. According to Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, the meaning of an artwork is identical to what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.⁵¹ According to some early work of E. D. Hirsch, the meaning of an artwork is entirely determined by what the artist intends to communicate but is not

⁵⁰ I have no theory of intention to offer but I don't think it matters to anything I say here. I hope to use the words "intention," "intend," and the like in a sufficiently theory-free way that my arguments hold up regardless of the particular theory of intention that one adopts.

⁵¹ See especially 1982: 13–5.

identical to what the artist intends to communicate.⁵² According to Carroll, the meaning of an artwork is determined by what the artist intends to communicate in conjunction with various other factors, such as artistic conventions.⁵³

I will not be concerned with the details that distinguish different versions of Intentionalism from each other. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, all of them are mistaken or, at the very least, in need of important qualification. What I will attempt to do in this chapter is just to explain why Intentionalism is appealing.

4.1 Artworks And Can Openers

Consider this case, which comes with some modifications from Danto.⁵⁴

Not A Can Opener

Dusty Wild is a sculptor and Pierce Hedge is an art critic. Neither Dusty nor Pierce has ever seen a can opener. Neither of them even knows that there are such things as cans or can openers. As it happens, Dusty one day makes a sculpture that—unbeknownst to her or Pierce—exactly resembles a can opener. Pierce immediately recognizes that Dusty’s sculpture makes an eloquent statement about gender roles and the human condition. He praises it as a masterpiece. Later on, Pierce encounters a can opener. Mistaking it for Dusty’s sculpture, he also praises the can opener as an artistic masterpiece.

⁵² Hirsch (1967: 1–23) and Knapp and Michaels (1982: 13–5), but see also Hirsch (1982).

⁵³ 1992 and 2009: 134–52.

⁵⁴ 1984: 29–30.

Following Danto, we may imagine Pierce praising both the sculpture and the can opener in the following words:

The single starkness of its short, ugly, bladelike and surprisingly ominous extremity embodies an aggressive masculinity, all the more pronounced by its formal and symbolic contrast with the frivolous diminishing helix, which swings freely but upon a fixed enslaving axis, and represents pure unavailing femininity. These two motifs are symbiotically sustained in a single powerful composition, no less universal and hopeful for all its miniature size and commonplace material. Had it been of preciousness commensurate with its size, like a piece of orfèvrerie, it would have lost scope, for the message concerns male and female as common denominator of the human condition. And had it been huge (and one must admit its essential monumentality) it would have exaggerated through heroization the cosmic banality of its theme. No, size and substance together reinforce image and import [...].⁵⁵

Supposing that Pierce is not making a mistake in praising Dusty's sculpture, why is he making a mistake (as he certainly is!) in praising a precisely similar can opener in exactly the same way?

The obvious answer to this question is that can openers are not ordinarily artworks, do not ordinarily make statements (much less eloquent statements), and are not about gender roles, the human condition, or anything else. Pierce, not knowing what a

⁵⁵ Ibid.

can opener is, fails to recognize this. He praises the can opener for features that it simply does not have.

There is something puzzling about this obvious answer. If Dusty's sculpture merits praise that the can opener does not merit, then the can opener must differ from the sculpture in some respect that has bearing on what sort of praise they each merit. However, according to Not A Can Opener, Dusty's sculpture exactly resembles the can opener. We may even suppose that they are molecule for molecule replicas of each other. So what could the relevant difference between them be?

Well, if the can opener and the sculpture really do exactly resemble each other, then the only differences between them must lie in the relations they each stand in to some other thing or things. And since the crucial differences between the can opener and the sculpture are just that the sculpture is an artwork that makes an eloquent statement about gender roles and the human condition whereas the can opener is not an artwork, does not make statements, and is not about anything, whatever relations account for the different praise merited by the can opener and the sculpture must simply be those relations in virtue of which Dusty's sculpture is an artwork that makes an eloquent statement about gender roles and the human condition.

Assuming the truth of some institutional theory of art, we already know, at least in broad outline, why Dusty's sculpture is an artwork. It is an artwork because of the relations it stands in either to our art related institutions and practices or to other works of art. Can we account for the sculpture's making an eloquent statement about gender and the human condition in terms of those same relations?

It would be surprising if we could. Think of some real work of art, say, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is about, among other things, 19th-century Russian Orthodoxy. However, *The Brothers Karamazov* would still be about, among other things, 19th-century Russian Orthodoxy regardless of whether there were any other artworks, art institutions, or art-related practices. So being related to other artworks, to art institutions, and to art-related practices in the ways that characterize works of art does not help us to account for why *The Brothers Karamazov* is about Russian Orthodoxy. Consequently, the relations in virtue of which an artwork counts as an artwork are not, in general, what accounts for an artwork's being about what it is about.

Even more to the point, as I argued in chapter two, what an object is about is often one of the factors that explains why it comes to play a major role in our art institutions; the meaning of an artwork is often one of its selection criteria. If the meanings of artworks were generally explicable in terms of the institutional roles that artworks play, this would be quite puzzling.

The lesson here is straightforward. Institutional theories of art do not tell us much about what artworks are about. They tell us why artworks are artworks. They help us to explain what the nature of art has to do with the peculiar value of artworks. But they tell us very little about the content of works of art, about why artworks have the content they have, or, indeed, about why artworks have any content at all.

4.2 Aboutness And Artists

Here is a tempting thought: perhaps if we could explain why Dusty's sculpture is about what it is about, that would be enough to explain all the other differences between

it and the can opener. Perhaps the sculpture is an artwork because it is about something or, alternatively, because it is about what it is about (remember, from chapter one, that some artworks seem to be accepted as artworks because of the interesting things that they tell us about the nature of art; so some artworks seem to be accepted as artworks because they are about what they are about). Moreover, perhaps the sculpture is so eloquent because it is about what it is about. After all, if it were about something else, its form might be less appropriate to its subject matter. So it is tempting to think that the sculpture's eloquence and status as an artwork can both be explained largely in terms of its being about what it is about. It is tempting to think that the sculpture's being about what it is about allows us to explain all the other important differences between it and the can opener.

Since Dusty's sculpture differs from a can opener only in the relations it stands in to some other thing or things, the sculpture must be about what it is about because of some relation that it stands in to some other thing or things. But which things? And what relation?

There is no interesting difference in the ways that the can opener and the sculpture are related to Pierce, who, after all, interprets them both and interprets them identically.⁵⁶ Nor can we explain what the sculpture is about in terms of the relations it stands in either to itself or to the can opener. Every work of art is related to itself in exactly the same way (by means of the identity relation). Yet not all artworks are about the same thing.

⁵⁶ We could even assume, to make the case clearer, that Pierce, being a bit of a fool, would continue to interpret them identically even if he were fully informed about their histories.

Furthermore, every object indistinguishable from a can opener (including other can openers of the same model) is related to the can opener in the most salient way that Dusty's sculpture is. Yet not all of them are about what Dusty's sculpture is about.

Eliminating the can opener, the sculpture, and Pierce from consideration, there are only two other things mentioned in Not A Can Opener that might help to account for why Dusty's sculpture is about gender and the human condition: (1) Dusty and (2) gender and the human condition. Option (2) is more obvious but also seems to be more easily refuted. For suppose that artworks were about what they are about because of some relation—the aboutness relation, perhaps—that they stand in to whatever they are about. Then artworks about non-existent entities—such as Goethe's *Faust* or Wagner's *Ring* cycle—would be about what they are about because of some relation that they stand in to non-existent things. But non-existent things cannot stand in any relation to anything. And so, artworks are not, at least not in general, about what they are about because of relations they stand in to whatever they are about. It seems, then, that Dusty's can opener is not about what it is about because of some relation it stands in to gender and the human condition.

Of course, this last claim does not logically follow from the argument that precedes it. Even though the content of artworks cannot, in general, be explained in terms of how artworks are related to what they are about, it may nevertheless be the case that the ways in which works are related to what they are about sometimes explains why they are about what they are about—particularly in cases in which artworks are about things that really do exist. So, for all I've argued, it is possible that Dusty's sculpture is about what it is about because of the ways in which it is related to gender and the human

condition. I will return to this thought in a subsequent chapter. For now, however, I want to consider our final option. Perhaps Dusty's sculpture is about what it is about because of how it is related to Dusty, who created it.

For all Not A Can Opener tells us, Dusty may have created very many different works of art. And many of them may be about something very different from what the sculpture we are considering is about. The fact that Dusty created the sculpture cannot, therefore, account for its being about what it is about. If the sculpture is about what it is about because of the way that it is related to Dusty, there must be some difference between the way that it is related to Dusty and the way that Dusty's other works—or, at any rate, her other works that are about something different—are related to her. What could this difference be?

4.3 The Virtues Of Intentionalism

At this point, the virtues of Intentionalism should be obvious. It makes sense of all the features of Not A Can Opener to which I have drawn attention and provides answers to all the questions I have raised about them.

First, Intentionalism explains why Dusty's sculpture is about what it is about. It is about what it is about because Dusty intended to communicate something about gender and the human condition by creating it. Second, Intentionalism explains why Pierce is correct in his interpretation of the sculpture but wrong in his interpretation of the can opener. He is right about the sculpture because his interpretation comports with what Dusty intended to communicate. He is wrong about the can opener because can openers are not, or at least usually are not, made with the intention of communicating anything.

Third, Intentionalism explains the way in which what Dusty's sculpture is about is determined by the relation it stands in to Dusty. Fourth, Intentionalism helps to explain why other artworks made by Dusty may be about very different things from what the sculpture is about. They may be about different things because Dusty may intend to communicate something different by making them. Fifth, Intentionalism explains how artworks can be about non-existent things. An artwork can be about something that does not exist because people can intend to communicate about things that do not exist—such as Voldemort, Santa Claus, etc.

If no better explanation of these five facts can be found, we have good reason to accept the following claim:

Weak Intentionalism

Sometimes, what an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.

Weak Intentionalism differs from Intentionalism only by a “sometimes.” To make a case for Intentionalism on the basis of Weak Intentionalism, one would only need to argue that what an artwork is about is determined by the same thing in every case.⁵⁷

It is easy to make a prima facie case for Intentionalism on the basis of what I have said so far. For Intentionalism has two theoretical advantages over other versions of

⁵⁷ Danto asserts something like Intentionalism on the basis of a hypothetical scenario much like Not A Can Opener, but without much argument. See, for example, 1984: 130.

Weak Intentionalism.⁵⁸ First, Intentionalism is a particularly strong version of Weak Intentionalism. It has more explanatory power than other versions do. Whereas every version of Weak Intentionalism explains why artworks are about what they are about in some cases, Intentionalism explains why they are about what they are about in every case. If Intentionalism is true, then it tells us a good deal more of what we want to know than Weak Intentionalism does. Second, and relatedly, Intentionalism is a more elegant theory than other versions of Weak Intentionalism are. A theory according to which an artwork's being about what it is about has the same explanation in every case is simpler than one according to which some artworks have the meanings they have for one set of reasons and other artworks have the meanings they have for a different set of reasons. So it seems to me that there is a presumption in favor of Intentionalism over other versions of Weak Intentionalism.

4.4 Artworks, Utterances, And Intentionalism

Intentionalism can also be made to seem appealing on other grounds. To see how, it will be useful to think briefly about the similarities between artworks and utterances, with which artworks seem to have, and are often assumed to have, a great deal in common.

⁵⁸ Strictly speaking, Intentionalism is only a version of Weak Intentionalism when conjoined with the obvious fact that there are some artworks. I will ignore this technicality in what follows.

Consider the following case:

Mindless Robot

Dotty Gearbox is the creator of a strange object. It looks superficially like a human. Really, it is a life-size porcelain doll with a device inside that generates sounds. The sounds it generates are completely random; it simply creates sound waves of arbitrary shapes and sizes. However, as a result, Dotty's doll sometimes generates sounds that are indistinguishable from real human utterances. This creates the illusion that the doll occasionally speaks. One day, as Dotty walks into her living room, her doll creates a series of sounds homophonic with the English sentences, "Repent of your sins! Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor!" These sounds are merely the result of the doll's random generation of arbitrary sounds. However, convinced that she has received a mandate from God, Dotty sells all that she has, gives the profits to charity, takes a vow of poverty, becomes a Nun, and lives out her days seeking forgiveness from God for her sins.

Dotty's response to the sounds generated by her doll seems like a mistake. Leaving her apparent theological commitments completely to the side, Dotty makes an error in her interpretation of the sounds she hears. She assumes that they are about something.

Indeed, she assumes that they mean just what an ordinary utterance of the sentences, "Repent of your sins! Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor!" would mean. But since Dotty knows, or is in a position to know, that the noises she hears are random—she is the

inventor of the machine that generates them, after all—there is no good reason for her to think that what she hears is a meaningful utterance.

This case is similar to one put forward by Knapp and Michaels. Suppose that you are walking along the beach and see written in the sand what appears to be the first stanza of a Wordsworth poem. As you stand reading, a wave rolls in, washes away the words, and leaves in their place the next stanza of the poem. According to Knapp and Michaels, you have two options. First, you may become religious, speculate that the sea ghost is writing poetry for you along the shore, and try to interpret it. Second, you may conclude that the markings you see in the sand are not the result of any intentional action but are merely the haphazard erosion marks of receding ocean water. Knapp and Michaels claim that if you opt for the second of these alternatives, you will give up the idea that the markings you see have any meaning, concede that they “merely seem to *resemble* words,” and stop trying to interpret them.⁵⁹

Let us suppose that Knapp’s and Michaels’s thought experiment is successful.⁶⁰ If it is, it shows that stanzas of poetry are like utterances in the following respect: the meaningful ones are not the result of mere randomness. What appear to be utterances and poetic writings, but are, in fact, utterly random and haphazard sounds or markings, are

⁵⁹ Knapp and Michaels (1982: 15–6).

⁶⁰ I doubt very much that it is, but will grant that it is for the sake of argument. My intuition is that, were I the one on the beach, I would continue to think I was reading a Wordsworth poem even if I didn’t convert to sea-ghost-ism. The example can be made more dramatic. Suppose the erosion marks appear to resemble not a poem but the first chapter of Nabokov’s *Pnin*. A friend and I read what we take to be the beginning of a novel and then realize that the marks were not the result of any intentional action. If I ask my friend what the story was about, do any of us really think his response would be, “What story?” An empirical philosopher could easily find out. Thanks to Gideon Rosen for discussions on this point.

not really meaningful, are not really about anything, and cannot really be correctly interpreted.

What Knapp and Michaels attempt to show about poetry can, in a similar way, be generalized quite easily to all artworks. For example:

Not A Sculpture

Pierce Hedge, oblivious to the mistake he made in praising an ordinary can opener as a brilliant sculpture, continues enthusiastically praising all manner of objects he thinks to be works of art. One day, while walking along the beach, he comes upon a rock that appears to him very similar to one of Dusty Wild's lesser-known sculptures. In fact, the rock is not a sculpture. It is merely the result wind and water erosion. However, Pierce mistakenly supposes that it is some new work of Dusty's, displayed in an unusual location. Pierce spends the next several hours trying to determine the best interpretation of the "sculpture." Eventually, he concludes that, while its message is a bit muddled, it makes a statement about the staleness of traditional artistic conventions.

Pierce's mistake, I take it for granted, is obvious. The reason it is a mistake is that what Pierce takes to be a sculpture actually is not.

What is interesting about Not A Sculpture and Mindless Robot is that Pierce and Dotty make the same kind of mistake. Both of them assume that something is meaningful when it is not. Moreover, it is quite natural to think that Dotty's "message from God" and Pierce's "sculpture" both lack meaning for the same reason: they are each the result of processes that are incapable of producing meaning. In order for Pierce's "sculpture" to be

about anything, it would need to have resulted from some process other than (or perhaps, in addition to)⁶¹ erosion. In order for Dotty's "message" to have meaning, it would need to have resulted from something other than (or, in addition to) the random generation of sounds. And something similar can be said of Knapp's and Michael's writing on the beach. In order for it to be meaningful, it would need to have resulted from something other than (or, in addition to) receding ocean water.

These considerations motivate the thought that artworks and utterances are alike in the following respect: for them to have meaning—for them to be about something—they have to be brought about in the right way. Things that appear to be meaningful artworks or utterances are not meaningful at all if they are brought about by the wrong sorts of processes.

Now, it is often claimed that in order for an utterance to have meaning, it must be uttered with the intention to communicate something. And it is often claimed that the meaning of a meaningful utterance is determined by what the speaker intends to communicate.

These claims can be given considerable support by cases like this one, due to Keith Donnellan:

Suppose that I think I see at some distance a man walking and ask, "Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?" [Suppose] the man over there is not carrying a walking stick but an umbrella; I have still

⁶¹ It is possible to create a meaningful work of art by making use of erosion. Suppose Dusty designed a sculpture to erode in interesting ways in order to communicate something about the transience of existence. Such a sculpture could be meaningful, despite be the result of erosion, among other things.

referred to someone and asked a question that can be answered, though if my audience sees that it is an umbrella and not a walking stick, they may also correct my apparently mistaken impression.⁶²

This case shows, at the very least, that the meaning of an utterance is quite often determined by what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it. I can refer to a man holding an umbrella by using the phrase “man carrying a walking stick” even though umbrellas are not walking sticks and even though my mistake does not amount to a change in the meaning of either “walking stick” or “umbrella.” I need not even be speaking ironically or figuratively. My audience may correct my mistake, but recognizing it as a mistake presupposes that they know just to whom I refer, which, in turn, presupposes that I have succeeded in referring to just whom I intended to, mistake or no.

Suppose, to continue Donnellan’s example, that I’m talking to you. If I go on to say to you that, “The man with the walking stick has a funny hat,” intending to make a claim about the man who is, in fact, carrying an umbrella, and you interpret my utterance as a claim about the man with the umbrella, you have not misinterpreted my utterance. If you form a belief, on the basis of my utterance, about my opinion of the umbrella-carrier’s hat, you have not committed an error. My utterance means just what you think it does, even though my words—taken literally or without knowledge of the circumstances or in a different context or to a less savvy listener—might suggest something rather different.

⁶² Donnellan (1966: 254).

Now suppose that there is in the vicinity of us a man wearing a funny hat and carrying a walking stick—Saul Kripke, perhaps, hiding behind some shrubbery. My statement is still about the man carrying the umbrella, even if both you and I know that Kripke sometimes wanders hidden about campus with walking sticks and funny hats. Nothing changes even if both you and I also know that the man I refer to is not carrying a walking stick, but an umbrella. Perhaps earlier in the day either you or I mistakenly referred to an umbrella as a walking stick. Then I may refer to “the man with the walking stick” simply to make a feeble joke at your or my expense. And I may continue doing so even with Kripke in the nearby bush.

Here’s the point: what makes my utterance meaningful seems to be that it is uttered with the intention to communicate something. Moreover, the meaning of my utterance is determined by what I intend to communicate. And this is true even if my language is nonstandard or reveals some misconception on my part, even if my words would, in a different context, refer to someone altogether different from whom I wish them to, even if someone else in the vicinity is more aptly described by my language, and even if both you and I know that.^{63,64}

Utterances are not unique in this respect. What is true of them, so far as the relationship between their meanings and the intentions that they result from, is true of a wide range of non-verbal forms of communication as well. Suppose I see a friend waving her hands wildly in my direction. What am I to make of it? Is she greeting me,

⁶³ It should be clear that these are all cases of what Grice refers to as “speaker’s meaning” (cf. Grice 1957).

⁶⁴ Burge-style cases may limit the scope of this claim (1979). So be it. Here I am only attempting to explain why intentionalism may seem very appealing.

particularly excited to see me for some yet unknown reason? Is she frantically warning me of an impending danger? Has she simply mistaken me for someone else? Is she trying to grab the attention of someone standing right behind me, having only inadvertently also gotten my attention? Or is she not doing any of these things? Perhaps she has just spilled hot coffee on her hands and is trying to get it off quickly. Whether my friend's gesture means anything at all, and what it means if it means something, is determined by what, if anything, she intends to communicate by waving.

So utterances and hand gestures seem to be alike in the following respect: what makes them meaningful—what distinguishes them from random sound waves (or, we could add, random bodily motions)—is that they are performed with the intention to communicate something. And, given that they are meaningful, what utterances and gestures mean is determined by what the responsible agent intends to communicate by performing them. So we have reason to believe this:

Intentionalism About Utterances

Utterances are meaningful because they are uttered with the intention to communicate something. What an utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

Since (1) utterances are not unique—what is true of utterances is also true of some other meaningful things, such as hand gestures—(2) utterances are like artworks at least insofar as neither can be meaningful without resulting from the right sorts of processes, and (3) we have a theory about what makes utterances meaningful, the following claim seems very appealing:

A Parity Thesis

If artworks are meaningful, they are meaningful for the same reason that utterances are. What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by many of the same things⁶⁵ that determine what an utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted.

Together, Intentionalism About Utterances and A Parity Thesis entail Intentionalism regarding the meaning of artworks.

4.5 Looking Forward

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I think that there is something wrong with Intentionalism; it is, at the very least, in need of important qualification. However, I think that Weak Intentionalism is true. That is to say, I think that what an artist intends to communicate by creating an artwork determines how the work should be interpreted in at least some circumstances. In the next chapter, I will begin to explain why.

What I will argue there has been anticipated by something I said above. While discussing Not A Can Opener, I pointed out that, while what an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted must sometimes be determined by the relation that the work stands in to its artist, I cannot claim that this is so in every case. What I will begin to argue in the next chapter and continue arguing in the following chapter is that, in

⁶⁵ I say “many of the same things” to make this thesis sound somewhat reasonable. Artworks often don’t have the sort of syntax that plays a crucial role in the meanings of most utterances. So it would be implausible to claim that the meaning of an artwork is determined by exactly the same things that determine the meaning of an utterance.

some cases, what an artwork is about is determined by factors that have little or nothing to do with any relation that the work stands in to the artist. As a result, what an artwork is about cannot, in general, be determined by what the artist intended to communicate by creating it. So, while Weak Intentionalism is true, Intentionalism is not.

5. Pluralism About Meaning

5.0 Introduction

In the last chapter, I introduced two theories about the meaning of artworks:

Intentionalism

What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.

Weak Intentionalism

Sometimes, what an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.

I also explained why Intentionalism is a very appealing theory of the meaning of artworks. In this chapter, I will begin to explain why, even though it is appealing, Intentionalism is not true but Weak Intentionalism is.

Before I can do that, some clarification is in order. The words “meaning” and “interpretation” are ambiguous, both in philosophical circles and in ordinary conversation. In one very important sense of these two words, they are quite closely related to each other: an interpretation of something aims at answering the question what the thing means. It is in this sense that I will be using these words throughout this chapter and the next. So nothing I have to say here will have anything to do with, for example, model theoretic interpretations of statements of formal logic. The “semantics” of formal logic is not the “semantics” of, say, linguistics. Model theoretic interpretations of logical

statements do not tell us what those statements mean.⁶⁶ Similarly, what I have to say here will not concern, at least not in the first instance, uses of the word “interpretation” that refer to performances. For instance, if I say, “Rostropovich’s interpretation of Dvořák’s cello concerto is my favorite,” or, “Jude Law’s interpretation of Hamlet was praised too much by critics and too little by the public,” I am not saying anything about meaning. This point can be made perfectly obvious by considering what happens when a student, confused by Hamlet or Dvořák, says, “I just don’t get it. What’s it all about? What does it mean?” I will not answer the student’s question if I play a video of Jude Law or a recording of Rostropovich—regardless of what we take the word “mean” to mean.

By contrast, suppose that my sister, upon reading some Dostoevsky, asks what *The Idiot* was all about in the following words: “What was the author getting at? What did it all mean?” I might answer her by saying that *The Idiot* is about the inadequacy of traditional Christian values in the modern world, that it shows the deficiency of those values by telling the story of a paradigm Christian who utterly fails to flourish in life, and that it thereby encourages us to rethink our own value system. This interpretation may not be particularly good, but it is the sort of thing that might answer my sister’s question what *The Idiot* means. It is that sort of interpretation and others like it—interpretations that are closely connected to some notion of meaning—that I will be concerned with here.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Burgess (2009: 20) and Soames (2010: 55–6).

Since I am talking here only about interpretations that aim at answering the question what something means, I will often switch back and forth between talk of interpretations and talk of meaning. It is my hope that no confusion results from this.

One more point of clarification. Often, particularly in the context of discussions about literary works, it is natural to talk about the meaning or correct interpretation of some portion of an artwork—a word or a sentence, for instance. Here is an example. In the opening sentence of Joyce’s *The Dead*, we are told that, “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet.”⁶⁷ Since Lily, as it turns out, was not literally run off her feet, we might well wonder what the word “literally” means in this context or, on a closely related note, what the sentence as a whole means. Here, I will not focus primarily on cases like this one. I will focus instead on cases in which what is at stake is the interpretation of some work of art as a whole, rather than some small portion of it.

This is not to deny that the interpretation of sentences within some literary work is often important to the interpretation of the entire work. There are important connections between the interpretation of an entire artwork and the interpretation of its parts, given that those parts are interpretable. In fact, I suspect that what I have to say here about the interpretation of entire artworks could also be applied to the interpretation of portions of artworks. But I will not argue for that conclusion here. The precise relationship between the meanings of parts of artworks and of entire artworks will not be my concern. That will have to be the subject of some future work.

⁶⁷ 1914: 138.

Here, I am concerned with Intentionalism and Weak Intentionalism as theories of the meaning and interpretation of entire artworks, to the extent that such interpretations aim at answering the question what an artwork, considered as a whole, means.

Now in the previous chapter I offered an argument for Intentionalism based on the following two claims:

Intentionalism About Utterances

Utterances are meaningful because they are uttered with the intention to communicate something. What an utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

A Parity Thesis

If artworks are meaningful, they are meaningful for the same reason that utterances are. What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by the same things that determine what an utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted.

Since these two claims mutually entail Intentionalism, I cannot consistently claim that Intentionalism is false without rejecting either one or both of them. I reject them both. In this chapter, I will argue that Intentionalism About Utterances is false and then set the stage for an argument that I will make in the next chapter against A Parity Thesis.

5.1 Body-language, Utterances, And Intentions

I begin with a case that may seem to have little to do with the interpretation of either utterances or of artworks:

Artless Liar

Peter Prevaricator is a liar who is cheating on his girlfriend, Credulous Kim. Lately, Kim has become suspicious. After Peter comes home late from work one night, she calls her friend, Judy Constance for advice. Judy comes to Kim's home and, together, she and Kim question Peter about his whereabouts and recent activities. It immediately becomes clear to Peter that Kim suspects his infidelity, so he lies. He insists that he came home late because of an important project at work. As he does so, his eyes shift restlessly to the side, his voice shakes ever so slightly, and he begins to fidget with one hand. Both Kim and Judy notice. They correctly interpret Peter's facial expressions, tone of voice, and body-language and conclude that he is lying about where he's been.

In this case, Kim and Judy correctly interpret Peter's actions by concluding that he is lying, even though that is not what Peter intends to communicate.

It is crucial to notice that, in this case, the discrepancy between what Peter intends to communicate (that he was at work) and what Kim and Judy interpret his body-language, tone of voice, and facial expressions to mean (that he is lying to conceal his activities) cannot be accounted for in terms of miscommunication. Kim and Judy do not misunderstand what Peter tells them; they understand perfectly well. Indeed, they think that he's lying because, even though they understand just what he intends to communicate, they also recognize by his behavior that even he doesn't think it's true. The proper interpretation of Peter's behavior in this case is simply not determined by what he intends to communicate by his behavior. This suggests that the meaning or correct

interpretation of some human actions is not always determined by what the agent intends to communicate.

Granted, there is a sense in which what Peter intends to communicate determines what his body-language means. If Peter had intended to communicate something true, then Kim and Judy would be mistaken to think that he was lying. But this has nothing to do with what Peter intends to communicate by allowing his eyes to drift to the side or his voice to tremble or his hand to twitch. Peter does not intend to communicate anything at all by those aspects of his behavior. And, given his behavior, Kim and Judy might reliably have determined that he was lying whether, as the case states, he claimed to have been at work or, as things may have gone instead, he claimed to have been binge drinking with an old college roommate. The correct interpretation of Peter's body-language has nothing to do with what Peter intended to communicate through his body-language. Ditto for his tone of voice and facial expressions.

It would be nice if we could show that utterances are sometimes like body-language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. If we could, it would show that the meanings of utterances are sometimes not determined by what a speaker intends to communicate by uttering them. It would show that Intentionalism About Utterances is false.

Now consider this case:

Michelle And Mischa

John and Shawn have two mutual friends, Mischa and Michelle. Shawn doesn't know it, but John and Michelle are dating. John desperately wishes that he could make their love publicly known, but Michelle has her

reasons for wanting to keep it a secret. The only person whom John has mentioned his relationship to is his therapist, Bob. One day, as John and Shawn are walking along Nassau Street, John looks up, sees Mischa approaching, and says, “Hey, look! It’s Michelle!” Shawn looks, sees Mischa coming, and immediately concludes that John misspoke. He said something about Michelle, but what he meant was that Mischa was coming. Unbeknownst to any of them, Bob is lurking in the shadows, watching. From his vantage point, he interprets John’s utterance rather differently. He understands it as an expression of John’s desire to make his secret romance known.

In this case, neither Shawn nor Bob misinterpret John’s utterance, despite the fact that they interpret it quite differently.

Just as in Artless Liar, the meaning of what is being interpreted in Michelle And Mischa—John’s utterance—is not determined by what an agent intends to communicate. And, just as in Artless Liar, this fact cannot be explained in terms of any miscommunication. Both Shawn and Bob know exactly what John intends to communicate. They don’t even disagree with each other. Indeed, if Bob didn’t understand that John intended to say something about Mischa, rather than Michelle, his interpretation of John’s utterance would be unfounded. However, whereas Shawn’s interpretation is correct because it correctly tracks what John intends to communicate, Bob’s interpretation is correct despite the fact that it does not track anything that John intends to communicate. And Bob’s interpretation would still be correct even if John intended to communicate something quite different from what he actually intends to communicate.

Michelle And Mischa shows that utterances are sometimes like body-language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Sometimes, what an utterance means and how it should be interpreted are determined by something quite independent of what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

There is something unsurprising about this. In Michelle And Mischa, as well as in Artless Liar, what is being interpreted is largely unintentional. John has a slip of the tongue. Peter's body-language is inadvertent. So while these cases show that meaning, including the meaning of an utterance, may sometimes be determined by something other than what an agent intends to communicate, they are consistent with this claim:

Intentionalism About Intentional Utterances

Intentional utterances are meaningful because they are uttered with the intention to communicate something. What an intentional utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

Intentionalism About Intentional Utterances could still be used to argue for Intentionalism. It would just need to be coupled with a slightly modified version of A Parity Thesis.

However, Intentionalism About Intentional Utterances is not true. For instance, in 2007, when Joe Biden said to the *New York Observer* that Barack Obama's popularity could be explained largely in terms of his being, "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy,"⁶⁸ he certainly did not

⁶⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/31/biden.obama/>

intend to communicate that all other mainstream American black guys were inarticulate or stupid or unclean or mean-looking. He was running for public office, after all. But, even though his statement wasn't an unintentional slip of the tongue—even though he uttered precisely the words he intended to—we were not making a mistake by taking his statement to be indicative of racist tendencies that he had no intention of communicating. This shows that in some cases what an intentional utterance means is determined by something other than what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it. Both Intentionalism About Utterances and Intentionalism About Intentional Utterances are false.

5.2 Equivocation?

One serious concern about my arguments above is that I may seem to be equivocating on the words “interpretation” and “meaning.” This concern can be made more dramatic by considering other uses of “interpretation” and “meaning” that seem to have even less to do with the meaning of ordinary utterances than the cases I have considered so far. For example, it is not out of the ordinary to talk about the “meaning” or “interpretation” of statistics and sets of data. If I am a biochemical engineer investigating some new experimental drug and want to know whether it cures a virulent disease better than any alternative currently on the market, I need to gather a large set of data. In order to draw any reliable conclusions from my set of data, casually glancing at it is not enough. I have to figure out what it means. I have to interpret it.

Now if the interpretation of statistics has little in common with the interpretation of facial expressions and if neither of these has much in common with the interpretation

of utterances in normal conversation, then the various cases of interpretation that I have been considering may have no bearing on the interpretation of art or the truth of Intentionalism. Perhaps it is only by accident or analogy that we describe all these various tasks as types of interpretation. Perhaps the conversationalist, the psychiatrist, the statistician, and the art critic are all involved in quite different tasks.

The importance of this worry for what follows (concerning the interpretation and meaning of artworks) can be best understood by considering the following question: is the interpretation of artworks more like the interpretation of facial expressions, the interpretation of statistics, or the interpretation of utterances in normal conversation? Or is it something altogether different from any of these?

Some philosophers, noticing that the interpretation of artworks proceeds rather differently in practice from the interpretation of utterances, have advocated abandoning the notions of meaning and interpretation entirely where art is concerned. Stein Haugom Olsen takes this line concerning literary works. He argues that since literary works, unlike utterances, have “an interest and a relevance which is independent of the situation of utterance,”⁶⁹ they “do not possess meaning-producing features analogous to those possessed by [utterances].”⁷⁰ Olsen thinks that this, combined with his claim that “it is natural to talk about the meaning of [...] utterances, while it is distinctly odd to talk about the meaning of works or texts,”⁷¹ constitutes good reason for thinking that literary works

⁶⁹ 1982: 180.

⁷⁰ Ibid: 179.

⁷¹ Ibid.

do not really have meaning and cannot really be interpreted, in any proper sense of “interpretation” or “meaning.”⁷²

But this view is deeply problematic. To start with a small point, it does not strike my ear as the least bit odd to talk about the meaning of a literary work. But that, as I said, is a very small point. A much more substantive point can be put in the form of a dilemma: are the words “meaning” and “interpretation” equivocal or not? On the one hand, if “interpretation” and “meaning” are equivocal terms, then speaking of the meaning and interpretation of artworks is not shown to be an error simply by pointing out that artworks are in many respects unlike utterances. And, on the other hand, if “interpretation” and “meaning” are not equivocal terms, Olsen faces the daunting task of explaining why the interpretation of statistics or facial expressions is to be cashed out in terms of “meaning-producing features analogous to those possessed by” utterances.

Other philosophers have simply accepted A Parity Thesis without ever seeming to notice that the words “interpretation” and “meaning” may be equivocal. Carroll, for instance, has argued that, since we evidently do talk coherently about the meaning and interpretation of artworks and since, as he supposes, utterances and communicative gestures are the paradigms of meaningful and interpretable things, artworks must have meaning in just the way that utterances and communicative gestures do. Carroll points out that the creation of art falls under the broader genus of “human doings,”⁷³ proposes, on that basis, that we think of “the interpretation of artworks [as] no different in kind from our interpretation of the behavior, verbal and otherwise, of the family, friends,

⁷² Ibid: 187.

⁷³ 2009: 48.

strangers, and enemies who surround us daily,” and claims that, “interpretation is typically aimed at understanding the intentions of others.”⁷⁴

Carroll’s view, it seems to me, is problematic in much the same way that the Olsen’s is. For if “meaning” and “interpretation” are equivocal terms, then Carroll is wrong to think that there is anything that “interpretation is typically aimed at.” And if “meaning” and “interpretation” are not equivocal, then Carroll has to explain either why he thinks (or is committed to thinking, at any rate) that the interpretation of statistics and facial expressions (which, like artworks, fall under the broader genus of “human doings”) aims at “understanding the intentions of others” or why—quite contrary to our ordinary linguistic usage—they don’t really count as interpretation at all.

Any satisfactory account of the interpretation of artworks must avoid such dilemmas. It must answer the question whether “interpretation” and “meaning” are equivocal terms. If the answer to this question is yes, it must explain what sort of interpretation, if any, is appropriate to artworks and why. If the answer is no, it must explain what the interpretation of utterances has to do with the interpretation of statistics, facial expressions, body-language, tone of voice, slips of the tongue, etc.

5.3 Nehamas On Interpretation

Alexander Nehamas has recently argued for a view of interpretation that, if correct, promises to explain what the various instances of interpretation that I have mentioned so far have in common and why they all are rightly considered interpretation

⁷⁴ Ibid: 138.

in the same sense of “interpretation.” Nehamas’s view is, in brief, that when we interpret things—utterances, statistics, body-language, or artworks—we are attempting to determine what those things *are*. Once we have interpreted something (i.e., discovered something about what it is), we can then go on to ask further interpretive questions (which is to say, further questions about what it is).⁷⁵ This view warrants further elaboration and scrutiny.

Nehamas argues for and explains his view primarily on the basis of a scene from Bob Fosse’s *All That Jazz* (1979). In the scene, a girl is discussing with her father a film that he has recently made. The father doubts that his daughter really understands the film and asks her whether she does. She responds that she understands “everything except for the part where two girls were in bed together and they were kissing. What was that supposed to mean?” The father responds by trying, quite inarticulately, to explain lesbianism to his daughter, who cuts him off mid-sentence and says, “I think lesbian scenes are a big turnoff.”

Nehamas’s remarks are worth quoting at some length:

The father thinks his daughter believes that the scene [...] *is* the kiss between the women that *means*, as he goes on to explain, that they are lovers. But what he believes to be the meaning his daughter had failed to grasp is in fact the very phenomenon whose meaning she questions: she wants to know the point of the love scene. What the scene is and what it means can’t be distinguished once and for all: to a less worldly girl, it is a

⁷⁵ 2007: 122–3.

scene of two women in bed, kissing; to this one, it depicts two lovers kissing; what it means in the first case is what it is in the second. And if the father had explained the meaning of that, he would have provided a new specification of the scene and raised a new question about what *that* meant.⁷⁶

The point is clear enough: to specify something's meaning is to specify what it is; what counts as interpretation and what counts as description is settled by how much we antecedently understand about what the thing we wish to interpret (or describe) is. And when what was once interpretation comes to be accepted as description, further interpretation can commence.⁷⁷

To take another example, consider the case in which I see my friend waving at me energetically and ask you what it means. Suppose you tell me that her waving is a greeting. Once you've told me what her gesture is (a greeting), you have answered my question what it means. But I might go on and ask what her greeting me means. And you might respond by saying that it is an indication of her pleasure at seeing me. If I ask what *that* means, you might tell me that it is evidence that she considers me a friend and wishes to continue our friendship. And I might even go on to ask what it means that she is providing evidence of her continued desire to be my friend (is she shallow and stupid? Why befriend me?). And so on, and so on.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid: 122.

⁷⁷ Ibid: 123.

⁷⁸ This paragraph owes much to conversations with Nehamas.

Of course if I ask too many questions, I will quickly overstep the bounds of available evidence. To know the meaning of someone's expressing a continued desire to be my friend, I would have to know a great deal more about the person than can be gleaned just from her waving at me. Further interpretation absent additional information would be irresponsible or stupid. However, if you gain more information about my friend—information about her psychological states, her feelings for me, her waving habits, facts about her culture (perhaps she's from a society in which waving has connotations it lacks here)—you will be in a better position to offer the further interpretation I desire. In any case, at every stage of interpretation, you answer my interpretive question by telling me with increasing specificity what you take the interpreted gesture to be.

5.4 Modifying Nehamas On Interpretation

Nehamas's view has the virtue of explaining why some cases of interpretation aim at discovering communicative intentions while others do not (to know that a gesture is a greeting is, among other things, to know something about the intentions behind it; to know that body-language is evidence of dissembling or lying is not). However, the view seems to cast the net too wide. Certainly not any theory or statement about what something is counts as an interpretation of it.⁷⁹ When Gollum tries to guess what the

⁷⁹ This is not yet to say that Nehamas's view is wrong. His views on interpretation are, I think, best understood not as a complete but as a partial characterization. In other words, I think he should be understood as saying that *if* I interpret something *then* I specify, or attempt to specify, what it is. But I do not think that his view should be understood as a biconditional.

object in Bilbo's pocket is, he is not interpreting the ring. When my elementary school teacher told me that the sun was a giant ball of burning gas, she was not interpreting the sun. And if you tell me that a panda is a member of the genus *Ailuropoda*, you are not interpreting the panda.

That being said, in order to determine that a panda is a member of the genus *Ailuropoda*, a great deal of interpretation had to be done—just not interpretation of a panda. Biologists classify species on the basis of a wide range of data: data from the fossil record, from DNA analysis, from anatomical examinations, etc. It is by interpreting these data that scientists determine what species are and, in particular, that pandas are members of the genus *Ailuropoda*.⁸⁰ Scientists determine what pandas are by interpreting data, not by interpreting pandas.

So there is significant tension between certain forms of interpretation and Nehamas's view of interpretation. When scientists interpret data about pandas, they are not determining what the data are; they are determining what a panda is. Granted, there is some sense in which scientists do determine what the data are: they determine that the data are evidence of one fact rather than another (for instance, that a panda is a member of *Ailuropoda*, not of *Ursus*). But such a specification of what the data are is of no interest at all in itself. Rather, it is interesting (assuming that it is interesting) because (i) the fact the data are evidence of is one that scientists are interested in knowing and (ii)

⁸⁰ I am assuming here that biological classifications are not arbitrary. If that assumption seems implausible to you, focus on a different case. Scientists determined what the sun was by interpreting a wide range of data including spectral data, luminosity, measurements of gravitational effects, etc. Such scientists were interpreting various data, not interpreting the sun.

scientists learn the fact in question by determining what the data are evidence of. So while it is true, in a sense, that in interpreting data we determine what the data are, it is also true that we are only interested in such specifications of what the data are when what we are aiming at learning is something else. We do not interpret data to figure out what they are; we interpret data to figure out some fact they are evidence of.

With that in mind, return to Nehamas's scene from *All That Jazz*. The father, remember, takes his description of a lesbian scene (as a lesbian scene) to be an interpretation of the scene (understood antecedently as a scene in which two women are in bed kissing). Why? Not, contra Nehamas, because interpreting something consists of determining what it is but, I suggest, because (i) the father thinks of the scene as evidence that the two kissing women are lovers and (ii) he assumes that *that* fact (that the women are lovers) is the information that his daughter wants to know.⁸¹ The father's interpretation of the scene establishes a fact that he takes the scene to be evidence of. In this respect, the father's interpretation of a movie scene is basically like the ordinary interpretation of scientific data.

Contrast this with a case in which someone attempts to specify what something is but obviously does not engage in any interpretation at all: Gollum's guessing what the object in Bilbo's pocket is. Why isn't this interpretation? Because there is no fact at all aside from what the object in Bilbo's pocket is that Gollum wants to know. He can't use the ring as evidence of anything because he doesn't even know what it is. And he is not

⁸¹ And we could add that the daughter is nonplussed by the father's interpretation because she already knows that the women are lovers and wants to know what she is supposed to understand from *that* about other aspects of the movie.

using anything else as evidence of what the object in Bilbo's pocket is because he's just guessing.

If what I have said is right, then interpretation ordinarily has two prerequisites: (i) that there is some piece of information we value or privilege or desire to know or, more generally, some question we wish to have the answer to, and (ii) that we use the thing we are interpreting as evidence—as a means of obtaining the relevant bit of information or of answering the relevant question. While Nehamas's view is not strictly wrong, it admits of an important modification: a specification of what something is only counts as an interpretation insofar as that specification answers some question we have, the answer to which the interpreted thing is thought to be evidence of.

According to this view, interpretations of utterances, body-language, and statistics are all of the same sort. Nevertheless, there is no difficulty at all in understanding the obvious differences between interpreting utterances and interpreting statistics. Rather, according to my view, what one accepts as an interpretation—whether it be of statistics or utterances—is going to be settled principally by two factors: what questions one wants the answers to, and how and whether one is prepared to think that something provides evidence of those answers. The interpretation of utterances proceeds so differently from the interpretation of statistics just because different questions are best answered by considering very different types of evidence, which, in turn, require different methods of analysis.

Moreover, this view readily accounts for a curious fact about Michelle and Mischa. It explains why Shawn and Bob both correctly interpret John's utterance in quite different ways. The proper interpretation of utterances is usually determined by what the

speaker intends to communicate for the simple reason that (i) a great deal of the information we ordinarily want, in the context of everyday conversation at least, is information about what the people we are conversing with intend to communicate and (ii) utterances, in combination with well-known linguistic conventions and cultural norms, provide excellent evidence of such intentions; your ordinary interest in interpreting my utterances, assuming you have any interest at all, is just in finding out what I intend to communicate. However, it is often proper for my psychologist to interpret my utterances rather differently from the way they are interpreted by other people—and it is appropriate for Bob to interpret John’s utterance differently from the way that Shawn interprets it—just because the information he is after is rather different from the information that most other people are after when they talk to me.

5.5 Looking Forward

The view of interpretation that I have been defending—that the act of interpretation is aimed at discovering some piece of information or answering some question by appealing to whatever is being interpreted—helps to explain why Intentionalism About Utterances is false. It is false because Shawn’s and Bob’s interpretation of John’s utterance (from Michelle and Mishca) are both correct and are both interpretations in exactly the same sense of “interpretation.” Both Shawn and Bob are appealing to John’s utterance to discover some piece of information that they value discovering. Shawn interprets the utterance to discover John’s communicative intentions; by answering the question, “What does John intend to communicate?” he answers to his satisfaction the question what John’s utterance means. By contrast, Bob interprets John’s

utterance to discover other information about John's psychological state; by using John's utterance to answer a wide range of questions about John's psychology, Bob answers to his satisfaction the question what John's utterance means. Because of Bob's interests, his interpretation has little to do with what John intends to communicate.

This view of interpretation also sets the stage for my rejection of A Parity Thesis. The reason for this is that my view of interpretation brings with it a weak brand of pluralism about meaning and interpretation. Since Shawn and Bob both correctly and differently interpret John's utterance, there must be more than one correct interpretation of John's utterance. It must have more than one meaning. In the next chapter, I will argue that there can also be more than one correct interpretation of an artwork and that some of these interpretations are determined by quite a different set of things than those that determine the meanings of utterances. This will be enough to show that A Parity Thesis is false, even though both artworks and utterances are, on the view I have been defending, both meaningful and interpretable in precisely the same senses of "meaning" and "interpretation."

My view of interpretation also sets the stage for my rejection of Intentionalism. Among the many different correct ways of interpreting an artwork, some I will argue, have little or nothing to do with the intentions with which the artwork is made.

6. The Interpretations Of Artworks

6.0 Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that the act of interpretation—whether of utterances or of statistics—is aimed at discovering information or at answering questions by appealing to whatever is being interpreted. I argued that there are many different questions that an interpretation may be aimed at answering and that the answers to each of these questions may count as answers to the question what the interpreted thing means. I suggested that this view of interpretation might be used to argue against A Parity Thesis:

A Parity Thesis

If artworks are meaningful, they are meaningful for the same reason that utterances are. What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined by the same things that determine what an utterance is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted.

In this chapter, I want to finish arguing against both A Parity Thesis and Intentionalism:

Intentionalism

What an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.

I also want to argue that Weak Intentionalism is true.

Weak Intentionalism

Sometimes, what an artwork is about, what it means, and how it should be interpreted are determined, at least in part, by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it.

In order to make my arguments convincing, I will first need to defend my view of interpretation against an obvious objection. I will conclude with some brief thoughts about the value of artworks.

6.1 An Objection And Two Responses

It seems that we can appeal to things in order to answer questions that interest us without interpreting them. In fact, it seems that we can appeal to things that it would be perfectly ordinary to interpret in order to answer questions that interest us without interpreting them.⁸² For example, if I use Thomas Jefferson's library (or, in particular, his bible) as evidence of his reading habits (or theological views), I am not interpreting literature (or the bible), even though literature (and, in particular, the bible) is the sort of thing that people interpret all the time. Or suppose I examine a recovered painting for fingerprints because I want to know who stole it from the National Gallery. I am not interpreting the painting. If I listen to a Beethoven symphony because I'm curious about the quality of musicianship in the New York Philharmonic, I am not interpreting a musical composition. However, according to my view of interpretation, interpretation aims at discovering some piece of information or at answering some question by appealing to whatever is being interpreted. So it seems I have conceived of interpretation too broadly. My view of interpretation seems to include things that it should not.

One way of responding to this objection is just to concede the point. Nothing I have argued for above or will argue for below depends on my view of interpretation

⁸² Thanks to Gideon Rosen, Andrew Huddleston, Errol Lord, and Jack Woods for first framing this objection and providing interesting examples.

being a complete characterization of interpretation. Even if I have offered a correct partial characterization of interpretation, it will be enough to support my conclusions. In other words, it may be the case that there is a good deal more to interpretation than just appealing to something in order to gain some interesting piece of information or to answer some interesting question that one has. So be it. As long as interpretation always involves at least that much, and as long as the cases of interpretation I am considering are all cases of interpretation—which they seem to me clearly to be—all of my arguments are still on solid footing.

Nevertheless, I think that a more interesting response to the above objection is available, at least in very many cases. It seems to me that the objection, or at least very many instances of it, rests on a misunderstanding. It is true that, when I use Thomas Jefferson's bible as evidence of his reading habits or theological views, I am not interpreting the bible. But since the bible is not identical to Thomas Jefferson's copy of it, I do not see why this should pose any difficulty for my view. On my view, to interpret the bible would require one to appeal to the bible in order to gain some piece of information or answer some question. This simply is not what takes place when I am appeal to only one particular book (or edition or manuscript or whatever else is not identical to the bible) in order to gain the information or answer the question I am interested in.⁸³ Similarly, when I listen to a symphonic performance to learn about musicianship or look at a painting to discover fingerprints, I am not interpreting a song or a painting because it

⁸³ But, on my view, to use Thomas Jefferson's bible as evidence of his theological views *is* to interpret Thomas Jefferson's copy of the bible (no other bible would do because no other bible has his emendations and marginalia). That strikes me as a virtue of my view.

is not the song or painting I am appealing to in order to gain the desired information. Rather, I am using a particular performance of a song and the fingerprints left on a painting as evidence. And it seems to me quite obvious that songs are not identical to performances of them⁸⁴ and paintings are not identical to fingerprints.

Still, the objection may be driven home with a more compelling example. Suppose that you analyze a painting that you are thinking of buying because you want to know whether the paint it contains will release toxic fumes that will poison your family. Plausibly, you are not interpreting the painting. But, plausibly, you are appealing to the painting in order to answer a question of great interest: “Is it safe to hang this on my wall?” So, plausibly, interpreting something is more than appealing to it in order to answer some interesting question or gain some valuable piece of information.⁸⁵

I think that there are two reasonable responses to this case. The first is to deny that it is the painting that one appeals to in order to determine whether the painting releases poisonous fumes. Poisonous fumes in the air might be evidence that the painting releases poisonous fumes but it is not clear that painting itself is, or could be, evidence of any such thing. The second possible response is simply to deny that you are not interpreting the painting in this case. Rather, you are interpreting the painting but are not interpreting it in a way that is relevant to its evaluation as an artwork. You are, that is to say, appealing to the painting to discover the answer to some question that you have, but you are appealing to facts about the painting that are quite independent of its artistic

⁸⁴ If this does not seem obvious, see Levinson (1980).

⁸⁵ Again, for the record, this objection presupposes that my view is a complete, rather than a partial, characterization of interpretation. Nothing I argue for below depends on understanding my view in that way.

merits in order to answer a question that has nothing to do with how much we value the painting as art.⁸⁶ Often, when we speak about interpreting artworks, we have in mind interpreting them with evaluative issues in mind—not because artworks cannot be interpreted otherwise but because we typically care about artworks most of all when we evaluate them positively as art. This, I take it, explains the appeal of the objection. But it also explains why the objection is not especially compelling.

6.2 The Interpretations Of Artworks

So what is art interpretation? When we interpret works of art, what is it that we want to know? What questions do artworks help us to answer? These are questions best answered by looking at actual interpretations of artworks.

Consider the literary criticism of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they argue extensively for various interpretations of many different literary works, all of which they use to support a general theory of 19th-century literature and feminist poetics. Specifically, they argue that 19th-century women writers wrote literature with the intent of communicating their concerns about dominant sexist prejudices and that they did so in a way that would go unnoticed by readers who were insensitive to the prejudices in question. Gilbert and Gubar begin by surveying a range of literature and literary theory, from Chaucer through the 20th century, that deals with sex

⁸⁶ Sometimes the materials an artwork is made of are very important to how we evaluate it. Think of Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953). Part of the achievement of this work consists in the fact that de Kooning used materials that would be very difficult to erase without damaging the paper beneath. In such cases, it seems like a mistake not to count as interpretation using the work as evidence of the materials of which it is made.

and gender roles as they relate to authorship. They argue, on the basis of this survey, that there is a dominant, if not ubiquitous, prejudice within the Western literary canon according to which authorship is best understood in terms of paternity and women writers are seen, therefore, as deviant and poorly suited to their work.⁸⁷

Gilbert and Gubar go on to argue, using broadly Jungian and Lacanian readings of fairy tales such as *Snow White* and of myths such as Plato's cave, that the gender biases inherent in Western literature have shaped the way that women writers have conceived of themselves and their literary undertakings.⁸⁸ They then argue, on the basis of neo-Freudian interpretations of literature written by women, that this self-conception, combined with the dominant Western view of authorship as paternity, has resulted in a particular sort of anxiety among American and European women writers,⁸⁹ and that we should expect this anxiety to manifest itself in predictable ways in 19th-century literature written by women.⁹⁰

Finally, Gilbert and Gubar give in-depth interpretations of the works of several major 19th-century female authors, showing how each of them manifests the precise sort of anxiety that Gilbert and Gubar predicted, explaining the various ways in which they responded within their writings both to their anxieties and to the Western sexism that gave rise to those anxieties, and explicating what they sought to communicate about their place and role within the Western literary canon and their society generally.⁹¹

⁸⁷ 2000: 3–36.

⁸⁸ Ibid: 36–44, 93–104.

⁸⁹ Ibid: 45–92.

⁹⁰ Ibid: 93–104.

⁹¹ Ibid: 107 ff.

What is interesting about Gilbert's and Gubar's work, at least as far as my view of interpretation is concerned, is not the specific conclusions that they argue for. Rather, their work is interesting for what it shows us about the plurality of literary interpretation. The first part of Gilbert's and Gubar's argument relies on interpretations of literature as symptomatic of widespread cultural phenomena—in this case, sexism regarding authorship; Gilbert and Gubar use a wide array of literary texts as evidence of cultural biases. The second part of their argument relies on interpretations of myths and fairy tales as evidence concerning the (often unconscious) psychological states of people among whom they are commonly told and retold. The third part of their argument relies on interpreting writings as indicative of the (again, often unconscious) psychological states of the people who authored them. The fourth, and most extensive, part of their argument relies on interpreting writings as reflective of the communicative intentions with which they were written and, in most cases, published.

During the course of their argument Gilbert and Gubar use literature as evidence of the answers to several, quite different, questions. Are there widespread prejudices about gender and authorship? What are they? How have these influenced the self-conception of female authors? How have self-conceptions shaped the broader psychology of female authors? What did female authors have to say about all of it? Etc. Gilbert's and Gubar's interpretations aim at answering a wide range of questions and they work under the assumption that it is reasonable to appeal to literature in order to gain interesting information about many different issues: the culture of the society in which it plays a part, the psychological constitution of the people who read and enjoy it, and the psychologies of the people who write and publish it.

Gilbert and Gubar are not unique in this respect. It is the norm for interpreters of art to have many different questions in mind when they undertake their interpretive ventures. Moreover, if we compare the work of different interpreters, the plurality of questions that artworks are used to answer only increases.

None of this should come as a surprise. It is a commonplace that people with different values and interests approach the same artworks in very different ways, and that even the same person may approach the same work differently on different occasions. Marxist critics have different values from feminist critics and ask correspondingly different questions when they approach and interpret artworks. Postcolonial critics have interests that differ from both Marxists and feminists, and offer distinctive interpretations of artworks as a result. Biographers of artists are often interested in yet a different set of questions and approach their subjects' artworks accordingly. Still, while each of these groups interprets art differently, and aims at answering a rather different set of questions, all of them count as interpreting art. There simply is no single question that art interpretation aims at answering.⁹²

It is an important consequence of this fact that Intentionalism is false as a theory of the interpretation of artworks. According to Intentionalism, the meaning of an artwork is determined by what the artist intends to communicate by creating it. However, in many cases, what an artwork means will have little to do with an artist's intentions. The reason is just that, in many cases, the answer to the question what the artworks means will be

⁹² Unless, perhaps, one is willing to count, "What does it mean?" as an interesting hermeneutic question. My point is simply that that question can only be rightly answered by giving the answer to some other question (like those that Gilbert and Gubar actually ask and answer).

given by the answer to some other question—for instance, a question about the culture of which the artwork is a part—that has little to do with the particular intentions of the artist.

Something similar can be said about other theories of art interpretation. For example, according to so-called *hypothetical intentionalists*⁹³ the interpretation of an artwork aims at answering the question, “What communicative intentions could most reasonably be attributed to the artist on the basis of this work in combination with various other factors?”⁹⁴ Now, this may be a perfectly reasonable question to ask and answer by appealing to the artwork that one is interpreting. But it would be a mistake to suppose that art interpretation can’t just as well aim at answering other questions. And so it would be a mistake to adopt hypothetical intentionalism as a general theory of art interpretation.

Another upshot of my view is that Weak Intentionalism is probably true as a theory of art interpretation. Although Intentionalism is false, sometimes, as the case of Gilbert and Gubar shows, our interpretation of art consists of appealing to artworks with the aim of discovering information about what artists intend to communicate by creating them. So, the answer to the question what an artwork means will sometimes be given by the answer to the question what the artist intends to communicate by creating it. Weak Intentionalism is probably true.

6.3 What Sort Of Pluralism?

Even though there may be many different ways of answering the question what an artwork means, still one interpretation of an artwork may be superior to another for a host

⁹³ Such as Jerrold Levinson (1996) and Nehamas (1981).

⁹⁴ Thanks to Gideon Rosen for help with this formulation.

of reasons. Suppose, for instance, that Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian psychological theories are all false. This would have serious implications for (among many others') Gilbert's and Gubar's work. It would mean that their conclusions were reached on the basis of serious mistakes. If no better reasons could be given for accepting their conclusions, it would mean that their views were unfounded and unreasonable. And if it turned out that the real psychological facts are actually incompatible with the psychological claims—claims about the conscious and unconscious mental states of authors and readers—that Gilbert and Gubar advance, it would mean that at least some of their conclusions are simply wrong. Now, I do not profess to have any idea whether Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian theories are fundamentally mistaken. The point is simply that, if they are wrong, then literary interpretations that are based on them are correspondingly subject to criticism, to the extent that such interpretations aim at discovering psychological facts.

It is worth pointing out that what I have just said is often accepted within the fields of literary criticism and interpretation. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar take issue with another literary theorist, Harold Bloom, on precisely the grounds that the psychological theories he makes use of are inadequate to answering the questions and discovering the information that his interpretations aim at answering and discovering.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom puts forward a general theory of the psychological forces that motivate great poets to write and how we can better understand their poetry as symptomatic of those forces. He argues, roughly, that “strong poets” are motivated by anxieties about the influence of past poets on their work and that we, as readers, can “more accurately” understand “any group of past poets who were

contemporary with one another”⁹⁵ by thinking about them in broadly Nietzschean and Freudian terms.⁹⁶ To make his case, he interprets a wide range of poetry, taking his interpretive cues from the psychological and genealogical theories of Freud and Nietzsche.

What is of interest here is not Bloom’s particular theory but the sort of criticism Gilbert and Gubar level against it. They claim that the psychological theories (Freud’s and Nietzsche’s) that Bloom appeals to in developing his views are primarily theories of male psychology and point out that the authors whose work Bloom interprets are male poets.

Bloom’s model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. [...] Not only, after all, does Bloom describe literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons, he sees Milton’s fiercely masculine fallen Satan as *the* type of the poet in our culture, and he metaphorically defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse. Where, then, does the female poet fit in?⁹⁷

Gilbert’s and Gubar’s point is not that Bloom misreads every poet he interprets. Rather, they argue that, if Bloom’s literary theories are reasonable at all, they are reasonable only insofar as they are concerned with writings by men. In order to interpret literature written

⁹⁵ 1973: 11.

⁹⁶ Ibid: 8.

⁹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 47.

by women, one cannot ask questions about the psychologies that give rise to it and then rely on psychological theories that leave women entirely out.⁹⁸

So Bloom's literary theories and interpretations are, according to Gilbert and Gubar, subject to criticism. To the extent that his theories apply only to literature written by men, they are of somewhat narrow scope. To the extent that he thinks they apply equally well to "any" set of past poets, he is being biased and unreasonable. Insofar as he interprets poetry by women according to his theory, he runs the risk of misinterpreting it, particularly if the information he seeks to discover through literary interpretation has to do with the psychological states of writers.

It is important to be clear on what exactly is at issue here. There is nothing importantly wrong, so far as I can see, with asking the question what psychological forces compel great male poets to write poetry. Assuming that Nietzsche and Freud are reliable guides to the male mind—it doesn't matter for the current argument whether they really are or not—one might give an accurate and insightful answer (albeit of limited interest) to that question by offering Freud- and Nietzsche-inspired interpretations of great poetry written by men. What is wrong with Bloom's theory, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is that he asks a different question: what psychological forces compel any great poet to write poetry? He assumes that that question can be adequately answered by appealing to theories of psychology that, according to Gilbert and Gubar, are only suited to men and by interpreting poetry written exclusively by men. If Gilbert and Gubar are right about

⁹⁸ Ibid: 46–8. Nehamas has pointed out in conversation that Gilbert and Gubar could have made a stronger point: to the extent that understanding literature by men requires understanding literature by women, Bloom is at serious risk of misunderstanding even male writers.

Bloom's psychological views—and I have nothing at all at stake in whether they are—then Bloom appeals to evidence that is inadequate to the question he asks and he ends up answering his question unreasonably as a result. Had Bloom asked a different question, had he drawn a narrower conclusion, his interpretation might, as Gilbert and Gubar note,⁹⁹ have been more compelling.

Simply put, interpretations of artworks can be wrong, right, shallow, profound, reasonable, unreasonable, boring, or interesting. They can be so because they can offer wrong, right, shallow, profound, reasonable, or unreasonable answers to whatever interesting or boring question(s) one seeks to answer by engaging with artworks. It is a point in favor of my theory that literary theorists and interpreters often criticize each other as though take this for granted in their work. While my view of the interpretation of artworks is pluralist, it is not radically pluralist. I am not committed to thinking that any interpretation of an artwork is equally as good as any other. Quite the contrary.

I hope that it is clear at this point why A Parity Thesis is false. It is false because the questions that art interpretation aims at answering are very different from those that the interpretation of speech acts typically aims at answering. Here are some of the questions mentioned above that the interpretation of, for example, literature might aim at answering: Are there widespread prejudices about gender and authorship? What are they? How have these influenced the self-conception of female authors? How have self-conceptions shaped the broader psychology of female authors? What did female authors have to say about all of it? When we interpret speech acts, we simply are not concerned

⁹⁹ Ibid.

with these questions. And this means, contrary to what A Parity Thesis says, that the different meanings that artworks have are determined by different things from those that determine the different meaning that utterances may have.

More importantly, there are certain questions we can answer by appealing to artworks that we cannot answer by appealing to utterances in any similar way. As I argued in the first three chapters, what distinguishes artworks from other things is the role that paradigm artworks play in art institutions and other art-related practices. Utterances, which are not usually artworks, do not play any this institutional role. As a result, one can appeal to artworks in order to discover information about the nature of art and art institutions in a way that one cannot—or, at any rate, should not—appeal to most utterances to discover. And this means, once again, that the factors that determine how we can correctly interpret artworks are different from those that determine how we can correctly interpret utterances. A Parity Thesis is false.

6.4 Interpretations And Values

Before I finish, I want to return to where I started and say something brief about the value of art.

Suppose that you and I interpret an artwork differently from each other. There are, according to the view of interpretation that I have been working with, at least two possible reasons for the difference. First, you and I might be asking different questions or seeking different information through our engagement with the artwork. Second, you and I may be asking precisely the same questions or seeking precisely the same information, and yet come up with different answers.

Let us suppose, for the moment, that any differences between the ways that you and I interpret a work of art are the result of differences in the questions we have in mind when we engage with it. This is, in a broad sense, a difference in our values. I value having the answer to one question and you value having the answer to another. Or I value having one sort of information and you value having another. Differences in our values can thus lead us to differences in how we interpret artworks.

There is also another way in which differences in value are relevant to the interpretation of art. Suppose that you and I have similar enough values (and are similar enough in a host of other ways) that we interpret an artwork in precisely the same way. We may, on the basis of our identical interpretations, nevertheless come to evaluate the work in question differently. For instance, if you and I agree that *Casablanca* is, for all its other greatness, a misogynistic film, then we might value it very differently if one of us is a misogynist and the other is not. Values not only influence the way that we interpret works of art, but also influence the ways in which our interpretations of artworks inform our evaluations of them.

So our evaluative opinions of artworks are indicative of our values in at least two different ways. First, they are indicative of what information and questions we care about obtaining and finding answers to in our encounters with artworks, which influences how we interpret them. Second, they are indicative of the ways in which our interpretations of artworks resonate with our other values.

There is, of course, another sort of reason for you and I to evaluate an artwork, a film say, very differently. Perhaps you and I have remarkably similar values and care about precisely the same issues when we see a film but one of us is more intelligent or

more sensitive to filmic conventions than the other. Perhaps you hate *Inception*, while I love it, because you see things in the film that escaped my notice and interpret it differently because of your greater insight. In that case, we might value the film very differently despite having similar values and caring about similar issues.

This is one reason why, when you and I disagree about the merits of a film, we can sometimes resolve our differences by engaging in criticism. I can explain to you why I enjoyed the film and you can explain to me why you did not. If we get far enough into the conversation, I will attempt to justify my evaluation of the film, in terms of my values, probably by arguing in favor of my interpretation of the film. You will, similarly, try to defend your interpretation of the film. If one of us can muster stronger reasons in favor of his or her interpretation, then hopefully the other will amend his or her understanding of the film and then, if we share sufficiently similar values, bring his or her evaluation roughly into agreement with the other person's. If the differences in our interpretations are the result of varying degrees of insight into the film, conversation can go a long way toward resolving these differences.

But suppose that you and I cannot agree on the value of an artwork no matter how carefully we attend to and discuss it. Perhaps this is because we have different values. Perhaps it is because we have such differing degrees of insight into the work and the conventions surrounding it that one of us simply cannot adequately explain his or her own interpretation to the other. Either way, our disagreement serves a valuable social function. If nothing else, it can help us to learn something about each other. And this is another feature of art that makes it peculiarly valuable.

6.5 Conclusion

Artworks have many different meanings. There are many different correct ways of interpreting them. Some interpretations are justified, rational, and interesting. Some are boring and unreasonable. Others are wrong. But all of them are interpretations and many of them are correct. Consequently, it is a mistake to talk about the meaning or the correct interpretation of an artwork, as if there were only one.

Intentionalism, since it suggests that there is only one right way to interpret an artwork, is false. A Parity Thesis is also false. Artworks often have meanings that ordinary utterances simply do not have. But Weak Intentionalism is true. Sometimes when we interpret works of art we are interested in discovering what the artists who created them intended to communicate by doing so. But, of course, we may be interested in many other things besides, depending on our own idiosyncratic values. And these values are often evident in the ways that we interpret and evaluate art.

7. Conclusion

I have attempted to accomplish two main objectives. First, I have tried to defend a theory, or rather a class of theories, about the nature of art. Second, I have tried to defend a view about the interpretation of art.

Regarding the nature of art, I have argued that it must be understood in terms of art institutions. According to the view that I have defended, a proper subset of artworks, the paradigm artworks, count as artworks in virtue of the relation they stand in to art institutions and art-related practices. Other artworks, those that are not paradigms, count as artworks in virtue of the ways in which they are related to the paradigms. This view of the nature of art, I have argued, allows us to partially account for the fact that art is peculiarly valuable and also allows us to answer skeptical worries about whether there even is such a thing as the nature of art.

Regarding art interpretation, I have argued that it is of a kind with the interpretation of utterances, facial expressions, body-language, and even statistics. When we interpret artworks, we appeal to them in order to gain information that we are interested in having or to answer questions about which we are curious in connection with them. What distinguishes art interpretation from other sorts of interpretation, more than anything else, is the range of questions that we are prepared to appeal to artworks to help us answer. This view of art interpretation also allows us to account, in a small way, for the peculiar value of artworks.

Regarding the value of art, a great deal more must surely be said. But the rest of it will wait for another time.

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