

“Defining” ‘Art’

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I. While perhaps not currently in the focal attention of most aestheticians, there has been a very substantial stretch of time, especially between the 1920s and 1960s - but also before and after (think only of Tolstoy’s *What Is Art*, 1897 or even Plato’s *Republic*, Book X, for that matter) - when the question of the nature of art was the center of thought in the philosophy of art. To this day, almost every anthology and introduction to the philosophy of art, usually in their opening chapter, asks the question, “What Is Art”, “What is the Nature of Art”, “What is the Definition of ‘Art’”, and other variants.

There is a lot of confusion and unclarity in this literature. Consider, as just one instance, Stephen Davies’ 2006 *Philosophy of Art*, whose second chapter is entitled, “Defining Art.”ⁱ Of course, only *words* have definitions, so which part of the chapter title is incorrect? Are we defining ‘art’ or is definition not quite what we are wanting for art? (I signify this in the present paper’s title.)

One might say that what we really want to know is *what it means* to call or conceive of something as art or as a work of art. But we would not be happy with a purely stipulative definition, as you might find in mathematics or science: ‘Art’ =df. Nor are we wanting mere synonyms for ‘art’ (if there actually are any!). The clearest cases of synonymy, such as those found in dictionary definitions by synonymy, tell us that two words have the same intension. They are a lexical license to interchange the words in most circumstances. For example, from the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

‘melancholy’: sadness or depression of spirits. Gloom. These words share the same intension and hence can be substituted for each other *salve* meaning as well as truth. But having synonyms at the ready does little for the understanding unless one has independent grasp of the meaning of the definiens.ⁱⁱ You already know what sadness is, and now, via synonymy, you come to know the meaning of ‘melancholy’. Herein lies the difficulty for definitions of art such as Bell’s, which assert that aesthetic objects are objects with “significant form”. We have little in the way of antecedent knowledge of significant form for a claim of synonymy to be very fruitful.

Most definitions do not work this way. They are usually complex phrases rather than single words. This concatenation is what gives many definitions explanatory and analytic power. They *provide* the meaning of the word – they *tell* you what a word means. They can be viewed as reports of the *assignment* of a certain meaning to a word by the competent speakers of the language.

II. But competent speakers quite often do not know the lexical definitions of terms they nonetheless use quite comfortably. I could not possibly offer you a definition of ‘crocheting’ which would distinguish crocheting from knitting, even though I use the word properly and can distinguish a crocheted from a knitted article.

And moreover, such definitions themselves are often blatantly in need of revision. My usually clear Heritage Dictionary lists as its first definition of ‘art’: “human effort to imitate, supplement, alter, or counteract the work of nature.” Sandbags used to fight the Mississippi River’s spring spillovers and huge excavators flattening the West Virginia mountains now count as art? Hardly.

These are two problems that can lead to the idea that there is no convincing reason to try to do better. If we can get along either without any definition or with quite a questionable one, perhaps definitions are really not of much interest after all.ⁱⁱⁱ

III. But let's have another look. Heritage's second and much better definition of 'art' is: "The conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty; specifically the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium". And later: "Any field or category of art, such as music, ballet, or literature." "A nonscientific branch of learning." This is still quite a mess, but at least tractors and sandbags aren't in the offing. First, art is said to be a conscious activity, and I suppose by extension, the products of such activities. These products are such as to "affect the sense of beauty" even though we know that not all art is beautiful. There is here a strange limitation to graphic or plastic art, but this is immediately followed by a definition by subclass, extremely truncated, but recognizing the non-plastic arts. We are finally reminded that art is not science.

Pretty obviously, it would be difficult to tidy up this definition into a definition by genus and species, or one stating individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being art. But it does succeed in associating a number of features with the concept of art. Artifactuality, creativity, manipulation of a (usually perceptual) medium, the affecting of a sense of beauty, being a non-scientific activity—these are certainly a cluster of characteristics commonly associated with art, even by aestheticians.

And so, as is well known, a number of philosophers, most prominently Wittgenstein, but more recently, Berys Gaut^{iv} and

others, have eschewed definition, especially the necessary-and-sufficient-conditions type, and accepted the idea that the concept of art should be conceived as a “cluster concept.”

IV. Actually, there are two, quite different, variants of the cluster concept. The first, which actually precedes Wittgenstein, derives from the observation that many aestheticians have made^v that the various arts are incalculably different from each other. What on earth does lieder have to do with architecture, does a novel have to do with a mobile? Art is a cluster of activities and/or artifacts that simply do not share some “nature” in common; there are only the practices and conventions and sub-cultures surrounding each individual type of art, but nothing *necessary* binds these types together. So the “cluster” referred to is the disjunction of the separate arts.

The other variant is the more Wittgensteinian one, coming from his famous discussion of games and family resemblances in the *Philosophical Investigations*, ss 65-77. We possess concepts, such as “a game” or “art” around which a certain cluster of *properties* or features (not sub-classes, as above) are characteristic of those things referred to. For example, most games (but not all) are activities someone wins. Perhaps most art (but not all) attempts something beautiful. Imagine five such properties were regularly associated (but not in every case) with art. It is easy to see how such a concept might work without any one property being logically necessary to the concept. If A,B,C,D, and E are our properties, it might be that only four of these are sufficient for a thing’s being an artwork. This generates these possibilities:

ABCD

BCDE

CDEA

DEAB

EABC.

Notice that no one property occurs in each of the five “clusters”, hence there is no property necessary for a thing to be a work of art.

But matters are even worse in a sense, for perhaps possessing one of these four clusters of properties is *not* sufficient for being a work of art in the following sense: perhaps the presence of some property, X, along with any of the clusters would defeat the object’s status as art: CDEA, for example, turns out not to be sufficient to make something art if X is also present. And clearly, many properties or many combinations of other properties, might play the role of defeater. Hence, ‘art’- as good an everyday word as ‘game’ - would lack a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Perhaps. But maybe the cluster nature of some concepts does not keep a necessary-and-sufficient conditions definition from lurking below the level of lexicality. Maurice Mandelbaum, a dear old colleague, argued as much^{vi} against the Wittgensteinian idea. Underlying the family resemblances that we may use to get a grip on the concept of a game, there may be a commonality: games are human activities invented and modified with the intent of being of absorbing practical interest to either participants or spectators. Nonetheless, no assertion that the cluster idea is not helpful need be made. I will suggest as much in a moment.

Relatedly, it should be pointed out that Morris Weitz's famous suggestion^{vii} that 'art' historically frustrates the desire for any stable and clear definition, because the concept is "open" to later "decisions" on our part to include new and innovative forms under the rubric, really only establishes that the reference, not the meaning or intension, of 'art' inflates over time in response to artistic creativity.

I wish to suggest that it may be more on the mark if we think of the cluster idea, in both of the forms distinguished above, as explanatory of how we come to *learn and wield* the concept of art and use the term 'art'.

V. There are actually a number of pretty obvious ways by which we learn to think and speak about art. Ostension in a variety of circumstances will bring a number of the arts together for us under the term. Rather similarly, we can learn what counts as serious art, and what might more leisurely be included, through awareness of a definition-by-subclass (a *cluster* of objects and activities accepted as art) perhaps in school or when consulting a dictionary, as we saw above. But we also can learn by divining, from a dictionary's "clustery" properties or attributes, what things have a chance of being considered art, refining our concept as we evaluate more features and come to think of apparent defeaters for certain combinations.

We do all this in the absence of a philosopher's true analysis of art, but this should be no more perplexing than my understanding of crocheting. And yet, I hardly think that crocheting is not definable at a deeper level than I am capable of providing, that would satisfy all the *crochet-aficionados* in their search for understanding that goes beyond mere concept use.

It is sometimes claimed that our concept of art is actually rather young, being formed only in the eighteenth century.^{viii} We may conjecture, perhaps, that the very different arts that we gather under the one concept are placed together only because of some sociological fact: as a fanciful example, let us imagine that most of the arts were considered the acceptable pastimes of the aristocratic upper class, and therefore distinguished from crafts or “lower” diversions such as weaving, tailoring, or jewelry-making, not because the arts shared some essential property or properties that gave them their special status, but simply because of the contingencies of history and culture. But it does not follow, of course, that the cluster is purely whimsy; maybe the archdukes and princes were appreciative of something special to be found in music, poetry, painting, and the like. It seems an open matter, worthy of further investigation, even though it is true that these cultural vicissitudes are very interesting indeed, and noticing what the aristocracy was up to was a way to learn some of what ‘art’ refers to.

VI. With so much talk in the literature of necessary and sufficient conditions, both pro and con, one would think that if we were to reach them, we would immediately have found clarificatory nirvana, but this hardly seems to be the case.

First, *materially* necessary and sufficient conditions can be as unpenetrating as we saw cases of synonymy to be. For example, Art may in fact be the human activity least subsidized by all the world’s governments, yet no one would take this as the “defining feature” of art. Notice that, in certain cases, materially necessary and sufficient conditions do not even guarantee co-reference, as perhaps they do in the case just given. Imagine a complex system of gears which is such

that gear a's being in position #1 is necessary and sufficient for gear b's being in position #2. Nevertheless, 'gear a's being in position #1' does not *refer* to (let alone mean) the same state as 'gear b's being in position #2'.

Second, if we strengthen our requirement and ask for conditions whose truth is somehow dependent upon "the concept of art alone" and not upon the material contingencies of the world, and if we have taken seriously what we might call the "crochet" problem (the problem that most of us may well be operating with a semantically deficient concept of art, i.e. one that is low enough in semantic content, due to its being learned in a "clustery" way) then we should not expect to be able to recognize what is, say, necessary to art simply by knowing the concept. This is a version of the "problem of the criterion," better known in epistemology and moral theory. How can we come to know what follows as a necessary condition "by the concept alone" unless we already know what is part of the concept?

Again, it may look as if the hunt for definition leads only to disappointment. But philosophical *analysis* of a concept is more than just "awareness that the subject contains the predicate," as it were. It is a broader understanding of how the concept is handled and how the word is used across many different contexts; it is the noticing of the facts of these contexts that can enlighten us to subtleties which we may have never noticed, but which – upon consideration – we would acknowledge as important to the concept. There is also an element of the normative to philosophical analysis. I do not mean that it is *stipulative*, but rather that it can suggest to us what we *ought* to be meaning by our use of the term, *given* certain facts observed

about usage and context and certain concerns unearthed regarding consistency and coherence.

It appears, then, that we are *theorizing* about art when we search for the definition of ‘art’. Rather like wanting to know “what ‘justice’ really means,” this search is not satisfied either by stipulation or by the lexical clustering of various attributes. Yet theories, of course, are not lists of necessary and sufficient conditions for applying a term. But in learning more about art by theorizing about it, we might be putting ourselves in a better position to offer a “theoretical definition” of ‘art’.

VII. We have seen that synonymy really only speaks to the substitutivity of one word for another. This can leave one pretty well in the dark about the nature of the thing referred to by the word in question. And truly, a definition by necessary and sufficient conditions does not address the matter of substitutivity at all. No one literally substitutes a definition of a word for its occurrence in speaking or writing. Also, a necessary-and-sufficient conditions definition of a word cannot be understood as necessary and sufficient conditions for *using* the word. There are no such conditions. Word usage is freely up to the speaker.

Is it that a theoretical necessary-and-sufficient conditions definition of art is a statement of the truth conditions for the open sentence, ‘x is a work of art’? Well, truth conditions can be construed as “assertability conditions,” the conditions of appropriateness for when to say “x is a work of art”. But it seems that theorizing about art is really not reducible to a suggestion about when to utter certain sentences. Assertability conditions tell you when to say “this is art,” and perhaps give you insight into *when* a thing is a work of art.

They need not have any pretension of enlightening you as to *why* a thing counts as a work of art.

Philosophers of language, especially after the so-called “linguistic turn” of the 1940’s and 50’s in philosophy generally, have used most of the notions discussed above, such as synonymy, substitutivity, clustering, truth conditions, assertability conditions, and so forth to clarify the question of “What is Art”, but word analysis and analysis of concept learning seems to fall short of an answer to the more metaphysical rather than a linguistic version of the question. When we construe a definition as an attempt to answer the question, “In virtue of what *is* x a work of art,” or “What is it for x to *be* a work of art,” we are in the realm of ontology, a realm of *identity* rather than linguistics. Although we have been advised not to embark on a search for “real definitions,” as Locke called them, and perhaps it will ultimately be folly to so embark, we seem to want more than the competency to use the word ‘art’, and more than knowledge of a stipulated cluster of artistic endeavors. We have this desire about natural kinds of all sorts, but of course, art is not a natural kind. But neither is justice, or knowledge or love, yet the same desire exists (because they are so enmeshed in our lives) for clarity as to what these things *are*.

VIII. To this end, we might conceive our search in one of two, obviously related, ways. We might focus on the predication, ‘x is a work of art’ and ask what must be true of x for it to be a work of art, or we might examine the property, “being a work of art” and attempt to complete an identity statement, “the property of being a work of art is identical to the property of ...”. I do not think that it matters which parlance we choose, as translation between the two seems

straightforward, since the conditions for being a work of art are simply the condition that x has the property of”

Arthur Danto is famous for having argued repeatedly that it is not the surface features of a work that make it art (since two perceptually indistinguishable objects might be one a work of art and the other non-art); rather it is the work’s being submerged in a theory, a history, a culture of a special (aesthetic) sort. So “being art” turns out to be some complex relational property to a historico-theoretical setting.^{ix}

Now, one can easily see that this idea can be nuanced and contoured in different ways. And, indeed, it has been. If we emphasize that the practices surrounding art can be seen as fairly institutionalized practices, if informally so, then we have hit upon one or another form of the “institutional” theory of art, first promoted by George Dickie.^x

Works of art, on this view, are again defined relationally, but the property is rather like a status property, either bestowed or accepted by an institution. “Being married” and “being Supreme Court Justice” are institutional status properties, and the status is *bestowed* by the institution. Notice that one of these is an honorific status, opening up the question whether the status of being a work of art is itself honorific, or normative at least to the extent that involves the recognition of value.

Institutional theories are unsatisfactory, I believe, not only because, logically speaking, they put the institutional cart before the horse that is art, but also because the notion of the conferral of status, in any of its forms, seems to have the relation of institution-to-art

misconstrued. Other unlikely institutions may be of help here. Does The Baseball Hall of Fame, or the Rock Music Hall of Fame bestow greatness on the “players” to be found inside? No. What these institutions do - what their institutional function *is* - is to publically *recognize* and *celebrate* the ball players and the musicians for their performances and their creations. Yes, the institutions bestow the title “Hall of Famer” upon them, and that is a totally institutional matter, but the institutions do not bestow the fame. Being a great performer or player is earned not bestowed. So, the function of the “artworld” is not gotten straight by the institutional theory. Art museums are thought of as educational institutions because they make available something of possibly great value to those who participate.

Moreover, the converse idea that art, itself, plays an institutional function, and perhaps may be defined in terms of it, seems a sociological distraction from our philosophical goal. Yes, there have been clear examples of art playing an institutional function: the soviet government using art for propaganda purposes, or perhaps more colorfully, the medieval and early Renaissance Church using religious art to instill and sustain its members’ faith. But, consider the latter case. It is truly *the Church’s* function to instill and sustain religious faith, not art’s. Art was found to be an effective instrument in executing the Church’s function because it caused experiences of beauty, awe, religious fervor, piety and the like in the followers. We actually find nothing in these institutionalist observations that subverts the aestheticist idea that art is definable in terms of its experience-producing powers.

IX. A more historically-oriented suggestion has been made by Jerrold Levinson.^{xi} Levinson confidently provides a definition of art in the severest, “=df” format:

X is a work of art =df X is an object that a person or persons having the appropriate proprietary right over X, nonpassingly intends for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e regard in any way (or ways) in which prior artworks are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded.

Putting aside all the hedging qualifications we find here, we are offered necessary and sufficient similarity conditions for a work to be art. But what is the correct regard we give to older artworks? Tell us this if one is going to define art. Recursiveness seems more a means of fixing reference than it is a definition. An electric car is not a car in virtue of being similar, in non-electric features, to gas automobiles. It is a car because it has an independent motor, maneuverable wheels or treads, space for occupancy, and is built to transport individuals. It is similar because it is a car, not a car because it is similar.

Telling us that someone is a Supreme Court justice because they are correctly regarded in the way previous Justices have been may tell us *when* someone is a Justice, but it does very little to tell us *what it is* to be a Justice.

Dominic Lopes, Thomas Adajian, and others refer to the institutional and historical definitions of art^{xii}

as “proceduralist” theories. I have begun a defense of what they call, in contrast, “functionalist” theories or definitions. Noel Carroll’s preferred terminology refers to “aestheticism” as at least a subset of functionalist theories.^{xiii}

It is my view that the traditional concern for a definition of ‘art’ can now be reduced to the still quite alive and interesting debate between proceduralism and functionalism or aestheticism. I have stated my misgivings regarding proceduralism. It is aestheticism (functionalism) that I am concerned to support here.

An aestheticist (hence functionalist) definition of art can be understood as an attempt to answer the ontological question of what a work of art is, or what the property of being a work of art is identical to, in terms of the broad nature of the experience intended and often produced by the work .

X. It is interesting, at this juncture, to canvas some other concepts, simply to determine where art might fit in. Consider a classic “secondary” property such as being blue. It is often said that being blue is a “response-dependent” property, definable in terms of the perceptual response commonly experienced by percipients with certain specifiable apparatus. Now if being an artwork is also viewed as a response-dependent property, it must, of course, be admitted that there is nothing like the regularity of response that we find in the case of blue. Knowing that something is a work of art gives us almost *no* predictive power as to what an individual’s response might be. Note further that being blue is not a functional property. It is not the function of being blue to cause some reaction in anyone.

It is the function of a *church*, however, to instill and sustain certain beliefs of a religious, metaphysical or humanistic nature. And yet, there do not seem to be any physical properties that are necessary and sufficient for being a church. No brick and mortar necessary.

One might think that a *hammer*, being a rather paradigmatic physical object, has statable, physically necessary conditions – mustn't it have a handle and a head or striking surface? But that intuition is quickly abandoned when confronted with: carpenter's hammer, tack hammer, ballpeen hammer, jackhammer, riveter, industrial forging hammer, industrial stamping hammer. A hammer is a tool defined by its function (to drive or form something, usually with downward explosive force). In this regard it is as abstract, if not as quiet as, a church.

In contrast, some functional objects are such that their function(s) appear to have physical entailments. The automobile is designed to independently (“auto-“) transport a small number of people and their property across moderate distances. But this function seems to imply certain physical or formal necessities, e.g. wheels or treads, an on-board motor or engine, steering, room for occupancy, and so forth.

Now, art. Although the various *art forms* seem (but problematically) to place physical constraints on art – you can't have a painting without some paint, you can't have a drawing without some inscription (Rauschenberg/deKooning?) you can't have music without some sound (John Cage?), you can't have a sculpture without sculpted material (holograms?), or literature without words – no such necessities seem to flow from the concept of *art*. (Perhaps this is the real reason why Dominic Lopes tells us that we do not need a theory of art at all, but only a theory of art forms.)^{xiv}

Being art, being a thing, artifact, or event that fulfills the function of art, does not seem to dictate much of anything in terms of concrete conditions, except maybe artifactuality itself. Being art may

be like being a hammer, only in that some created or manipulated artifact is involved, but maybe more significantly, it is like being a church, in that its function does not dictate much about the *form* art must take. It seems that it would be as satisfying to have a functionalist theory of art as it would be to have a theory of religion and not, *contra* Lopes, just religious forms. We wish for more than enumeration.

XI. Let's, then, look at a traditional functionalist/aestheticist analysis of what a work of art is. I mean, of course, the work of Monroe Beardsley.

The clearest statement of his position can be found in his 1970 article, "The Aesthetic Point of View," although there are earlier treatments.^{xv} What he offers is a enthymematic series of definitions that make the logical direction of his conceptual analysis perfectly clear: a work of art is to be defined in terms of its capacity to produce aesthetic gratification, which itself is defined, in order to finally discharge all reference to the aesthetic, and hopefully avoid circularity:

A work of art (in the broad sense) is any perceptual or intentional object that is deliberately regarded from the aesthetic point of view.

To adopt an *aesthetic point of view* with regard to S is to take an interest in whatever aesthetic value that X may possess.

The *aesthetic value* of an object is the value it possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification.

Gratification is aesthetic when it is obtained primarily from attention to the formal unity and/or the regional qualities of a complex whole, and when its magnitude is a function of the degree of formal unity and/or intensity of regional properties. (Beardsley, 1970 ss II)

There are many matters of concern about Beardsley's suggestion that I do not wish to engage here. The critics we are about to consider can focus our discussion. Beardsley rightly calls his view, or at least his view of aesthetic value, "functionalist" and "instrumentalist" (Beardsley, 1958, 531). The role of art, its *sine qua non*, is to stimulate an experience in the audience that has a singular intrinsic value. Do not be confused by the term 'instrumentalist'. Art is instrumental in generating these valuable experiences, yes, but the experiences are not (primarily) instrumental for personal or social change, attitude adjustment or the like. Their value lies in their being experienced.

I also want to dismiss a debate about "art for art's sake," a muddled mess if ever there was one in philosophy. Sometimes, e.g. in the hands of strict formalists, like Clive Bell this idea was a reaction to romantic interpretations of art, and an explanation why such criticism hit a wall when confronting impressionist, post-impressionist, cubist, Dadaist, and other modernist trends in art. On other occasions, it has been used as a base for an attack on moralism, the idea that the true (only) value in art comes from its moral thrust or content, and that art should be judged (and censored) on the basis of its moral (or maybe social or political) not aesthetic, value.

Beardsley argues directly against moralism.^{xvi} Furthermore, though he is often misunderstood as a formalist, he is no Clive Bell (or

Kant, for that matter) and at best is a “soft” formalist, since his “regional” properties are meant to include humanistic and expressive properties true of regions of a work or the work as a whole.^{xvii}

What I want to retain from Beardsley’s view is the idea that art’s value derives from its capacity to give us experiences that we value, in part, maybe, because they are experiences hard to find otherwise in our life. In an uncharacteristic and romantic passage from *Aesthetics*, Beardsley states the unique value of art:

What is the good of life itself, except to be as fully alive as we can become – to burn with a hard gemlike flame, to choose one crowded hour of glorious life, to seize experience at its greatest magnitude? And this is precisely our experience of art; it is living in the best way we know how. Far from being a handmaiden to other goals, art gives us immediately, and richly, the best there is in life, intense awareness – it gives us what life itself aims at becoming, but seldom achieves outside of art.^{xviii}

Danto argues that Beardsley’s aestheticism is ultimately circular, since we must first identify something as a work of art before reacting to it aesthetically. This, he thinks, follows from his overworked claim that art can be perceptually indistinguishable from non-art.^{xix} But this is unconvincing, since one only needs to know that an object is probably or potentially a work of art to trigger an aesthetic experience, and afterwards, when one establishes that it is indeed a work of art, regard one’s aesthetic experience as having been appropriate. There is no reason here to think that artworks cannot be defined as those objects which are intended to, and have the potential to, cause aesthetic experiences.

Noel Carroll's main complaint about aesthetic theories of art is that they are still a version of "art for art's sake," finding aesthetic value in private experience disconnected to the broader social concerns in which art is embedded. He says,

"Its keystone is the concept of aesthetic experience valued for itself and not for any end that it might serve. By making this the essence of art, the aesthetic theorist, in the same breadth, separates art from every other end (moral, cognitive, political, religious, etc.), since the aim of art is an experience disconnected from everything else"^{xx}

Art has added dimensionality not captured by aestheticism, according to Carroll.

I suppose it is possible to read Beardsley this way, but this is not my reading. Art has human, not just formal, content for Beardsley. It can be expressive of deep emotion and exemplify complex ideas such as pantheism.^{xxi} It is not a cold formalism that is expressed in Beardsley's ebullient remark mentioned above. If art succeeds in connecting to the various dimensions of human life, then even the phrase, "art for art's sake," no matter its history, tells us only that art has intrinsic – not hermetic – value.

XII. Danto's, Carroll's and similar worries might be allayed with a proposal such as this:

To be a work of art is to be any product (object or event) of creative human activity intended to be appreciated or appreciable by others, as an object of intrinsic value for its sensuous beauty, emotive expressiveness, or cognitive content regarding the human experience, culture and

history, nature, the divine or religious, or other matters of human concern. The goal of the involved activity is not usually the establishment of confirmable scientific truth regarding natural phenomena but rather the apprehension and appreciation of value.

We might suggest this conceptual analysis as a preferable *lexical* definition of ‘work of art’, but if we take seriously the idea that lexical definitions express what people usually mean by a term, it may be that most people have only an enumerative or “cluster” definition to work with, or may have not given a thought to the relation of art to science, or the possible range of art as it is suggested in the analysis above. They may think that art is simply a matter of pleasure, or a pastime no different from games or sports. At best, the analysis could be seen as a suggestion as to what users of the term *should* have in mind. This is not worrisome, though, because we are theorizing about art and not about peoples’ linguistic understanding.

This analysis is aesthetic in that art is defined in terms of an appreciative experience caused (or intended to be caused), and the experiential content is connected to broad human concerns that are not hermetic in any way. There is no apparent circularity involved, and yet the main idea behind aestheticism is maintained. Adjustments certainly may need to be made in this analysis, but the main idea comes through: the function of art is to produce intrinsically valuable experiences in those who intelligently engage with them.

XII. Gary Iseminger, in *The Aesthetic Function of Art*^{xvii}, offered his support to aestheticism, but only by rejecting the “traditional”

Beardslean form and suggesting a “New Aestheticism,” whose emphases have changed.

Iseminger’s theory^{xxiii} maintains a functionalist flavor but it focuses not on the function of an artwork, but rather the function of the artworld to which artworks belong as products of the artist, acting in his/her role in the artworld.

The function of the artworld, Iseminger says, is to promote aesthetic communication. Emphasizing aesthetic communication rather than the creation of experiences of value seems different from the usual aestheticist focus; however, Iseminger understands the promotion of aesthetic communication in terms of artworks’ capacity to afford appreciation. This seems to bring us back around, a little closer to traditional aestheticism. It is fair to judge Iseminger’s position as a mix of proceduralism and aestheticism, the proceduralist aspects being the concern with the artworld as an institution, and the emphasis on the practice of communication rather than the creation of aesthetic experience.

I have already suggested that the function of the artworld is a different matter than the question what an artwork does or has the capacity to do. If the current function of the 101st Airborne is to secure the Normandy coastline, yes, it is sensible to say that this is the function of the members of the 101st – but only collectively. The job of the bombardier on the B-17 “The Betty Mae” is to release Betty’s bomb load at time, t , and coordinates, x,y,z . It is a kind of category mistake, at this level of talk, to attribute to the bomber the function of securing Normandy. In attempting to define ‘art’ we are investigating what a work of art does or can do; the function of the artworld as a whole is an issue at a different “altitude”. Just as the

bombardier's function is to release the bombs, while only the 101st Airborne can secure the coastline (even though the bombing may certainly contribute to the Airborne's success) so too the Beethoven Op. 132 String Quartet succeeds in expressing an extraordinary sense of resigned, quiet fatalism, while the function of promoting aesthetic communication belongs to the artworld (even though Beethoven may certainly contribute in this respect). We might appropriate J.L. Austin's well-known and marvelous distinctions to help us here.^{xxiv} The Op. 132 may perform the *illocutionary* act of expressing resolved fatalism, but the promoting of aesthetic communication is, at best, a *perlocutionary* result of the composition.

The promotion of aesthetic communication, then, is primarily one of the functions of the institution, the artworld, and is, at best, a perlocutionary outcome of artworks' producing the kind of experiences articulated above. (As a painter myself, I am much surer of my intention to produce valuable visual experiences than I am concerned to promote aesthetic communication. It is not that I do not wish to communicate something, but this is done essentially, and more fragilely, through the production of the visual.)

Iseminger himself states that not all artworks must engage distributively in the promotion of aesthetic communication.^{xxv} A speech endorsing and cultivating environmental activism may promote communication and cooperation regarding other related political topics; then again, it may not. The speech's true function is to instill concern about the environment, and when it also positively affects other political discussion, is this not more a proceduralist issue about speech-making, rather than the function of the speech on the environment?

In sum, Iseminger's attempt to revitalize aestheticism may be appreciated, but "No thank you" is probably the correct reply to his substantive suggestions.

XIII. Conceptual analysis is, in a sense, the philosopher's theoretical definition. It does not require banging around a laboratory to establish the flashpoint of magnesium, but it does require experience with various art forms and a fair amount of banging around our conceptual and linguistic space. Surely, it is accepted that conceptual analysis should or can be consulted when we are defining words and phrases of interest, in this case, 'art' and 'work of art.' But we have seen that this is tricky business if concept analysis leads us into matters of ontology. What a thing is can diverge and go beyond how we wield a concept. The scientific theories that yield identity claims such as "gold is the chemical element with atomic number 79" or "water is identical to the molecular compound H₂O" have no claim to lexical synonymy, since the words were used successfully long before the theoretical discoveries, and to this day, many of those who speak of gold or water have no conception of their underlying structure.

Yet, there is an attraction to saying that we can now give *logically* necessary-and-sufficient-conditions definitions of real ontological importance for both 'gold' and 'water' – they are, respectively, "the yellow, malleable element mineable from certain mineral deposits whose chemical identity is that having atomic number 79," and "that fluid found in our lakes, streams and oceans having the chemical composition H₂O."

Logical necessity here seems to have modal implications. It is necessary (in every possible world) that gold has atomic number 79

and water is H₂O. ‘Water’ and ‘gold’ are what Saul Kripke has called “rigid designators.”^{xxvi} But these examples are, of course, examples of natural kinds, and we have seen that “art” is probably a functional concept. If we think of “hammer” as another functional concept, we seem to be prepared to allow hammers in other possible worlds to be physically quite different from our hammers, yet if the function were significantly altered, we would not refer to such a thing as a hammer. (Consider also, the non-natural kind, baseball. A sport involving the tossing of fish would simply not count as baseball whereas a baseball game regularly scheduled for thirteen innings would.)

Whether ‘art’ is a rigid designator is an extremely interesting question. First, there is the question whether the term for *any* functional concept can be rigid. Rigidity was first introduced by Kripke to refer to things whose deep physical nature was ostended in our world and thus fixed in all possible worlds. However, there seem to be alternatives. Is ‘tiger’ a rigid designator because genetic history ties all tigers to our world? This is rather similar to Levinson’s idea to tie the concept of art recursively and historically to *our* art of the past. Would this not make ‘art’ a rigid designator?

But when we move to a functionalist (especially aestheticist) conception of art, things change. Not only do we allow the referents of art to change from culture to culture in our world (think of phrases like, “this is the art of the Incas” or “the Maoris had their own concept of art”) but it also seems that we are prepared to accept possible worlds in which art is not only referentially different, but also functions not quite the same (if to a great extent similarly) as it does for us. (Consider the thirteen inning baseball game.) For example, if music in some possible worlds did not cause perceptual

experiences as much as dream-like states after which our doppelgangers said the same things as we do, I suspect that we would accept this experience as similar enough to our reactions to count this as *their* music. (Think about how many humans describe their intense musical experiences.) Moreover, as we know from our own experiences of Schoenberg and Webern, the structure of music itself could well be quite different. We see, here, that there is a kind of “openness” to the concept of art, but an openness that does not injure the aestheticist position.

For the most part, we do think of art as *singularly* human artifacts, but that may simply show where our usual interests lie. I believe that ‘art’ is functionally rigid to a great extent, but referentially open and non-rigid when we are speaking of possible worlds. Perhaps our reference to *human* experiences of appreciation needs to be relaxed in our analysis of art, but as I said before, the reference to human activity and experience naturally occurs in the definition offered because we are most interested in actual human experience rather than in possible worlds. Yet, the facts are I have presented them. ‘Art’ is a non-rigid designator, more or less.

XIV. Underneath the considerable linguistic confusion that we have surveyed and that a good philosophy of language should have clarified long ago, the problem of defining ‘art’ is still alive, and has basically transformed itself into the ontological and theoretical debate between aestheticism (functionalism) and nonaestheticism (or proceduralism, if you will). We still want to know what it is (or whether there is something to say) in virtue of which a thing is a work of art, and *this* is metaphysics not linguistics. To be sure, one’s philosophical analysis of art may be statable in the form of a

definition of ‘art,’ but in doing so, we are not really worried about lexicality, synonymy, cluster-learning or other facts about how we learn and use the word, and we should not be confused by these matters.

Aestheticism, I have argued, goes to the core of things. Artworks are cultural objects embedded in very complicated ways in any number of social architectures and hence can be viewed from many interesting and different perspectives. They are expressions of their surrounding culture and times; they are educational vehicles; they are modes of communication. But nothing can be communicated without an experience being stimulated. And that is how art functions -- and what makes something art. ‘Art’ “defined”.

ⁱ Steven Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Blackwell Publishers, 2006). Also see Davies’ *Definitions of Art* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

ⁱⁱ At worst, definitions by synonymy are circular and nearly vacuous, if you enter with no previous knowledge, e.g., ‘schizoid’: person suffering from schizophrenia.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Art*. (Cambridge University Press, 1997). Also see Kendall Walton, “Aesthetics – What? Why? And Wherefore,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2007).

^{iv} Berys Gault, “The Cluster Concept of Art” in Noel Carroll, *Theories of Art Today* (Madison:University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

^v cf. DeWitt Parker, “The Nature of Art,” reprinted in E. Vivas and M. Krieger, *The Problems of Aesthetics* (New York, 1953) for a particularly elegant statement.

^{vi} Maurice Mandelbaum “Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts,” *Australasian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.2, no.3 (1965).

^{vii} Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Esthetics,” *The Journal of Art and Aesthetic Criticism*, Vol. 15 (1956).

^{viii} c.f. Paul O. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 12 (1951) 496-527 and vol. 13 (1952) 17-46. Much more recently, see Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pg. xv.

^{ix} Arthur Danto, “The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964). See also Danto’s *The Transformation of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

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- ^x George Dickie, "What is Art? An Institutional Analysis," in Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974). For Dickie's revised theory, see his *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach* (Oxford University Press, 1997) pg. 92.
- ^{xi} "The Irreducible Historicity of the Concept of Art," in Levinson's *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 13-26. See also *Music, Art, & Metaphysics* (Cornell University Press, 1990). pp. 8-9.
- ^{xii} Adajian, Thomas, "The Definition of Art," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/art-definition/>>.
- Dominic Lopes, "Nobody Needs a Theory of Art," *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. CV, No. 3, March 2008. pp.109-127.
- ^{xiii} Noel Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* Oxford University Press, 2010, Introduction and Ch. 3.
- ^{xiv} Dominic Lopes, "Nobody Needs a Theory of Art," *Journal of Philosophy*, CV, 3. March 2008. 109-127.
- ^{xv} Monroe Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View," *Contemporary Philosophical Thought*, 3 (1970). See also *Aesthetics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Second Edition, 1958) pp. 531; 563f.)
- ^{xvi} *ibid*, pp. 563f.
- ^{xvii} *ibid*, pp.331f.
- ^{xviii} *ibid*, p. 563.
- ^{xix} See Arthur Danto, "Aesthetic Responses and Works of Art." *Philosophic Exchange*, Summer 1981, ss 1.
- ^{xx} Noel Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 12.
- ^{xxi} Monroe Beardsley, "The Testability of an Interpretation," in *The Possibility of Criticism*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). ss2.
- ^{xxii} Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004).
- ^{xxiii} See Iseminger, 2004, pg. 128 for a summary.
- ^{xxiv} J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Lecture VIII, pp. 94-107.
- ^{xxv} Iseminger, 2004, p. 25.
- ^{xxvi} Saul Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, eds. *The Semantics of Natural Language*, (The Synthese Library, 1971. pp.253-355.)