Anti-Anti-Essentialism About Art

I. INTRODUCTION

The successful specification of the definition of art has so far proven elusive. Discouraged by repeated failed attempts at the definition of art, numerous anti-essentialist philosophers have suggested alternative accounts. Kathleen Stock, for instance, argues that artworks are such only on the basis that art experts say that they are and she further claims that there is no underlying art essence.1 Dominic McIver Lopes suggests that the chances of successfully constructing definitions of the individual arts are better than that of defining art in general, and so he suggests the following alternative to the definition of art: “item x is a work of art if and only if x is a work in activity P and P is one of the arts.”2 The anti-essentialist account that has received the most attention recently is Berys Gaut’s construal of the cluster account of art.3 Gaut claims that “the anti-definitionalist project is grounded… in Wittgenstein’s remarks about family resemblance.”4 Accordingly, Gaut’s Wittgenstein-inspired cluster account consists of a list of criteria that “count toward” art status, none of which are necessary for art, but certain combinations of which are jointly sufficient for art status. If something meets all of the criteria then it definitely is art. Also, anything that is art must meet at least some of the criteria.5 The account allows for certain flexibility: if some new feature becomes recognized as art-making then it could be added to the original list of criteria.

In this paper I defend the definitional project by arguing that the strongest anti-essentialist arguments are unsuccessful in ruling out either the possibility or the value of a definition of art. Based on my observations regarding a blind spot in Wittgenstein’s anti-essentialist “look and see” approach, I conclude by suggesting a possible avenue of investigation for essentialism regarding art.

II. AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY OF A DEFINITION OF ART

What follows are four significant anti-essentialist arguments. I explain them and offer my own critique in order to defend the viability of the definitional project.

II.1. BUT WE ALREADY KNOW WHAT ART IS (WITHOUT A DEFINITION OF IT)

Contiguous with doubts about the possibility of a definition is skepticism of the value of a successful definition of art. Consider the following quote from William E. Kennick’s 1958 paper “Does traditional aesthetics rest on a mistake?”:6

We are able to separate those objects which are works of art from those which are not, because we know English; that is, we know how correctly to use the word ‘art’ and to apply the phrase ‘work of art’. To borrow a statement from Dr. Waismann and change it to meet my own needs, “If anyone is able to use the word ‘art’ or the phrase ‘work of art’ correctly, in all sorts of contexts and on the right sort of occasions, he [or she] knows ‘what art is’, and no formula in the world can make him [or her] wiser”.


In the same paper Kennick posits the warehouse test to support his point. Imagine a warehouse filled with various items: “pictures of every description, musical scores for symphonies and dances and hymns, machines, tools, boats, houses, churches and temples, statues,” and so forth. Next, imagine asking someone to go into that warehouse and telling them to remove only the artworks. Kennick suggests that someone would be better guided by their own intuitions than armed with a definition that specifies art in terms of, say, significant form. We can successfully do this, he claims, because we are competent users of the term “art.”

But such an observation does not mean that a definition of art could not be valuable for other purposes. Differing opinions about what art should be like have impelled some to question the status of some works of art. Financial motivations have also resulted in lawsuits disputing whether something is or is not art. Examples include a court case which determined that Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture Bird in Space (1923) was actually art and, more recently, the European Commission’s (bizarre) finding that works in transit by Dan Flavin and Bill Viola must have customs duties paid at the higher rate applicable to light fittings and electronic goods rather than at the rate applicable to artworks. These sorts of disputes would be less arbitrarily decided and more informatively justified with a plausible definition of art. Additionally, Stephen Davies notes that a definition might provide some surprising insights regarding the nature of art. Successfully identifying art’s essence may elucidate relations between various art-related concepts. And this might provide for a deeper understanding of art, which would be of interest to the multitude of people for whom art holds significance for their cultural, social, and personal identity.

II.2. IT IS DIFFICULT (IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE) TO CONSTRUCT A SATISFACTORY DEFINITION OF ART

Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley argue that there are three requirements for a definition of art that will be difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to satisfy. These are, first, the critical requirement: that an account of art must be informative regarding critical appreciation of art; second, the conditions requirement: that art is defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; and third, the openness requirement: that the extension of art, art practices, and expectations regarding art all change over time. If we forego the openness requirement by specifying the manifest properties that an artwork must possess, as has been the case with traditional aesthetic theories of art, this would leave a purported definition open to counterexamples. If the critical requirement is not satisfied, then the purported definition has no resources to claim intensional adequacy of the definition even if it is extensionally adequate (as is the case with relational definitions like the institutional account). But foregoing the conditions requirement allows the cluster account to provide an informative theory of art that is also open regarding art’s manifest properties. If we must give up on one of the three requirements, then the cluster account is the best choice for a descriptive, future-proof, informative account of art, they claim.

In response to such considerations we may note that there is no logical contradiction between Neill and Ridley’s three requirements for a successful definition of art (the openness, condition, and critical requirements). So even if it is true that the history of putative definitions of art is one of failure the possibility is still open that all three requirements may eventually be satisfied. Further, there is a good philosophical reason why we should seek to find necessary and sufficient conditions to complete a definition: We may admit that the possession of bundles of characteristics from a cluster account may have use in identifying art or justifying the art-status of some artifact, and thereby justify the account in terms of some practical adequacy, but we are still missing an explanatory account of why the selected art-making properties are art-relevant. And finally, even if we accept both Neill and Ridley’s presupposition that there are no manifest properties common to all artworks (the openness requirement) and also their arguments against the informativeness of definitions based solely on relational properties (and thus failing the critical requirement), I will suggest that there are still other properties available that may contribute to a definition that satisfies all three requirements.
II.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF CONCEPT FORMATION ARE INIMICAL TO DEFINATIONAL PROJECTS

Jeffrey Dean has argued that there are psychological theories of concept formation that provide reasons to doubt that the concept of art can be captured essentially using necessary and sufficient conditions. Dean refers to the prototype psychological theory of concept formation, which is distinct from the classical theory of concepts that is based on the idea that something either does or does not fit the list of features that must be possessed in order to be a member of that category. The prototype theory claims that some categories have a “radial” structure where there are central paradigmatic or typical cases for a category that form a basis for instances of variations from those central cases. In such a structure, there is no set of rules that can determine the extension of the concept. This still allows for the existence of reasons for claiming that something is art—it is not the case that just anything can become art.

Thomas Adajian has listed several reasons to be skeptical of using the prototype theory of concepts against the definitional project. He notes that a psychological thesis about concept formation doesn’t hold much sway regarding the viability of definitional projects aimed at extra-psychological phenomena (e.g., as would be the case for social facts if they truly are based on intersubjective acceptance or recognition). Adajian also notes several standard objections to the prototype theory of concepts: first, classically defined concepts also exhibit typicality; second, prototype structure does not account for highly atypical instances of a concept and can incorrectly include phenomena that do not belong to the concept; third, not all concepts have prototypes; fourth, the combining of concepts is not explained easily by prototype theory. (Typical instances of “pet” and of “fish” are not used to constitute the concept of “pet fish.”) Moreover, typicality can vary over time.

In response to Adajian’s criticisms, Aaron Meskin notes that some attempts at definition are aimed at capturing our concept of art. In these cases, the prototype theory, if true, may count against the possibility of classical definition. And further, even those definitional attempts that do aim at extra-psychological phenomena try “to accommodate intuitions about actual and counterfactual cases” and so the psychological argument still has force. I agree with Meskin on this point and suggest that in order to overcome his challenge we might focus on theorizing about the extra-psychological social facts manifested in artistic practices that may provide a rationale by which to judge intuitions as either good or bad. Such a change in method would preserve the descriptive project of definition from the prototype theory, even if it is a true theory of concept formation.

II.4. WITTGENSTEIN’S ‘LOOK AND SEE’ APPROACH

Influenced by Wittgenstein’s work in Philosophical Investigations, Morris Weitz argues that artworks are connected by a network of resemblances. As anti-essentialists have invoked Wittgenstein in order to argue against the possibility of defining art, we should consider whether the relevant advice is appropriate for identifying the essence of art.

Here is what Wittgenstein has to say regarding the concept of games: Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!

Anti-essentialists have claimed that if we employ the “look and see” method of analysis we will find that there is nothing that unites the concept of art except a network of similarities. Attempts to define art, both by reference to intrinsic properties of the artifact or by reference to certain kinds of relations that must hold in order for some artifact to be art, have failed according to their estimations.
Wittgenstein’s “look and see” methodology for definitions demands that we observe commonalities among items. These commonalities may take the form of intrinsic properties shared by those items (e.g., a particular function that artworks can be observed to have), or, according to some definitions, relational properties (e.g., some position that an artwork is required to occupy in relation to art institutions or other works). Moreover, interpretations along these lines have been endorsed by numerous anti-essentialists. For example, Neill and Ridley state that “[Maurice] Mandelbaum is certainly right that Weitz is interested only in the ‘manifest’ properties of works of art; and in this Weitz seems faithful to Wittgenstein.”

Wittgenstein’s instruction seems innocuous enough. What could be simpler? But I will argue that, as a distillation of a methodological approach, it is inadequate to the task of analyzing a certain class of concepts whose essence would be excluded if they exist.

The methodological reliance on empirical observation will become problematic if all of the following conditions obtain:

- First, if the essence of the concept is in the property that items of that type have the function of rewarding a particular form of engagement with those items.
- Second, if the actual manifestations of the entities of that kind exhibit ontological diversity (e.g., concrete objects and events; singular and multiple instances, etc.).
- Third, if the resultant observable (or reported) rewards from the relevant form of engagement with these items are varied.
- Fourth, if the reward that accompanies the essential form of engagement is for its own sake (i.e., the appropriate engagement with the object is intrinsically rewarding).
- And fifth, if there is significant variation in how the form of engagement is manifested in practice.

Given the conjunction of the above conditions, it is unlikely that the relevant essence would be observed in data from any empirical research that employed Wittgenstein’s approach.

There are at least two empirical methodological problems in applying Wittgenstein’s method of analysis of these kinds of concepts. First, if we are observing common features and relations between items then one thing that we definitely are not doing—at the same time—is engaging with the items in the essential manner. Consequently, we cannot, at that time, introspect on how we are engaged in obtaining value from the items. Second, as an external observer to others engaging with the relevant entities, we might not be able to see the similarities in how people obtain value from these items because we don’t have the relevant access to their mental activity. If the essence of a concept lies in its character as a self-rewarding form of engagement, then there is no end-product to be observed. We might be able to ask the participant what value they got out of their engagement with the item, but if the rewards are various, as they are in art, this will not give us much of a clue as to what the essence of art is.

The situation gets worse for analysis of these particular kinds of concepts when coupled with Wittgenstein’s further advice “Don’t think, but look!”: if there are multiple ways in which people actually do go about obtaining various specific valuable rewards from certain artifacts, then we will not be able to identify the general form of the activity that is specific to these kinds of things without examining multiple actual cases and generalizing what is going on from this data set. But this sort of generalizing based on second-order examination of our observable activity is excluded from a methodology that commands us only to observe and not to think. Wittgenstein’s methodology is antithetical to conceptual analysis of a certain class of concepts, assuming they exist, the definitional characterization of which requires both introspection and abstraction of the form of our engagement with those objects.

Let’s check whether art meets the various criteria that qualify it for this class: First, my suggestion is that the essence of the concept of art lies in the characteristic that artworks are the kind of thing that reward a particular form of regard. Namely, they are expected to provide artistic value when appropriately
It is outside of the scope of this paper to provide a characterization of the kinds of social facts that ground the appropriate appreciation of artworks. But, if the argument of this paper is correct, this kind of essentialist project has been relatively neglected and so is worthy of further investigation. Second, there is huge ontological variety among artworks. Artworks may be manufactured artifactual objects, or they may be ephemeral improvised events; works may be singularly instanced or have multiple instances; there is huge diversity in the kinds of material employed in artworks; works come in various sizes or, if works are conceptual, may even have no size at all—and so forth. Third, the actual rewards appropriately obtained from artworks are diverse: we may, for example, take pleasure from a poem, experience intellectual satisfaction from a play, be thrilled by a horror movie, or be disgusted—while being prompted to reflect on that disgust—by some contemporary art (e.g., Martin Creed’s “Sick Film,” Work No. 610 [2006]). Fourth, the reward that accompanies artistic regard is for its own sake. Engagement with artworks is self-motivating, and appreciation of artworks is an end in itself. Lastly, there is large variation in how artistic regard is manifested in practice. We listen to a symphony, read a book, watch a play, etc. Given the variety of art forms and genres, the variety of emotions that artworks might aim to evoke, and the variety of approaches they invite, it seems very unlikely that we will find commonality among the resulting valuable effects of art based on a theory-scarce look-and-see approach. We might ask the audience what value they got out of the work, but if the rewards are various, as they are in art, this will not give us much of a clue as to what the essence of art is.

Essentialist definitions are preferable to anti-essentialist accounts at the very least for their potential to illuminate the nature of the concept. So we should resort to a cluster account only when reasonable attempts at definition have failed. But so long as definitional projects are guided by common interpretations of Wittgenstein’s “look and see” procedure for analyzing concepts, I argue, there is likely to be uncharted logical space where the essence of art may reside. So, if Wittgenstein’s advice has become the most influential guide to analyzing art, then I suggest that it may have misdirected attempts at definition by introducing a blind spot that excludes recognition of the essential feature of art. If my claim is plausible, the anti-essentialist must admit that further investigation into the possibility of a definition of art is required before any claim to anti-essentialism can be upheld.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that the arguments for anti-essentialism fail to show that definitions are not worthwhile or possible. If we take seriously Berys Gaut’s claim that anti-essentialism regarding art is grounded in Wittgenstein’s comments regarding family resemblance then, if my argument holds, a blind spot has been introduced into our conceptual analysis. On this basis, I propose that investigation into a definition in terms of the form of engagement that is distinct to artworks as an artifact kind merits further attention. Additionally, such an investigation would yield a deeper understanding of our practices of artistic appreciation.
Endnotes


4 Gaut, “The Cluster Account of Art Defended.”

5 Gaut, “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept,” 26–30.


7 Stephen Davies notes that observers may have difficulty identifying some contemporary works of art if they were in Kennicq’s warehouse (e.g., Carl Andre’s *Equivalent VIII*). See Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 43–44. But Dominic McIver Lopes makes the point that context is important for these works, and that nobody mistakes Duchamp’s *Fountain* for a real urinal under normal circumstances (Lopes, *Beyond Art*, 71–73).


9 Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art*.


Meskin “From Defining Art to Defining the Individual Arts,” 133.


Neill and Ridley, “Relational Theories of Art,” 145.

The approach I am advocating might seem similar to the proposal by Maurice Mandelbaum in “Family Resemblances and Generalization concerning the Arts,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, 3 (Jul., 1965): 219–228. Here Mandelbaum suggests that relational attributes be investigated and suggests, for example, art are those objects “having been created by someone for some actual or possible audience” (222). I noted earlier Neil and Ridley’s criticism that relational accounts fail the critical requirement. My suggestion is that we characterize the form of engagement itself, that is, describe the formal characteristics of artistic appreciation. This distinguishes it from relational accounts like those suggested by Mandelbaum (and later developed by Dickie).


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