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Anti-Essentialism

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ESSENTIALISM

Anti-Essentialism

From the late nineteenth century to the 1950s one of the main foci of aesthetic inquiry was the attempt to develop definitions of art and such related concepts as visual art, music, tragedy, beauty, and metaphor. Clive Bell (1958) [orig. 1914] famously stated that either all works of visual art have some common quality or when we speak of "work of art" we speak nonsense. DeWitt H. Parker (1939) argued more generally that the assumption underlying every philosophy of art is the existence of some common nature present in all the arts. This search for a *common* quality or nature of art was generally take to be a form of essentialism

When analytic philosophers came to aesthetics in the 1950s they saw it as dominated by the essentialism of G.W.F. Hegel and such idealist followers as Benedetto Croce (1922) and Robin George Collingwood (1938). It was in this context that John A. Passmore (1954) attacked aestheticians for pretentiously saying nothing and for trying to retain mystery rather than dispel it. Aesthetics, he maintained, has presented us with empty and accommodating formulas based on an attempt to impose "a spurious unity" on a conflicted field.

Another strand of anti-essentialism was to be found in writings that attacked the notion that there is something that all the various art forms have in common: something that holds together painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry and architecture, but perhaps leaves out gardens or photography. Important to anti-essentialism in this regard was P.O. Kristeller's (1951, 1952) claim that the concept of art as a certain specific collection of forms did not even exist before the 18th century.

Although not a contribution to the philosophy of art, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) had a profound influence on analytic anti-essentialism. Wittgenstein was not totally opposed to the existence of essences, yet he did object to the assumption that there is an essence that corresponds to every abstract

term or concept. Instead, he asked us to "look and see" whether there really was something in common between all entities called *x*, where *x* stands for any general term. He observed that there are certain terms, for example, game, for which there are no necessary and sufficient conditions. When we look into the concept of game we find only a "complicated network of similarities." Wittgenstein called these similarities "family resemblances," since they are like the physical resemblances we might find between members of a family. Philosophers were quick to apply this idea to the concept of art. [*See* Wittgenstein.]

Several aestheticians in the late 1940s and 1950s took an anti-essentialist line. W. B. Gallie (1954) called the assumption that to define something we must know its essential nature the "essentialist fallacy." Drawing on Wittgenstein's family resemblance analogy, he held that the referents of abstract words such as *art* do not necessarily have some one thing in common. He also insisted that essentialism leads to errors in criticism. Gallie later (1956) rejected some of his earlier views, in particular that "art" is a family resemblance concept and that we do not need a concept of art in criticism. He came to see the concept of art as essentially complex and essentially contested, much like the concept of democracy. Anticipating more recent writers,

Gallie argued that analysis should be pursued in a historically sensitive way.

Paul Ziff (1953) stressed that there are different senses of *work of art*. He argued that there are no clear-cut cases of works of art in the sense that there are clear-cut cases of tables. Taking Nicolas Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Wome*n as a relatively clear case, Ziff constructed a set of characteristics he considered sufficient conditions for something to be art in the sense that this painting is. (None was a necessary condition.) Anything that satisfies these conditions is a "characteristic case," and anything that is sufficiently similar to a characteristic case (meeting some subset of the sufficient conditions) is a work of art in that sense of *work of art*. Sufficient similarity is judged on the basis of our conception of the function of art. Thus a definition of art simply describes one use of *work of art* considered reasonable in light of social consequences and the functions of a work of art in our society.

Perhaps the best known of the anti-essentialists was Morris Weitz. Weitz (1956) believed that all the great theories of art attempted to define art by stating its necessary and sufficient properties, and that each of these theories failed. They succumbed to counterexamples, were circular, were theoretically vague or were untestable. Instead of asking after the essence of art, philosophers

should analyze the logic of the concept of art: what the term art does in the language. We then discover that art is not definable in terms of necessary and sufficient properties or conditions. It is not even necessary for a work of art to be an artifact. Art, rather, is a family resemblance concept in Wittgenstein's sense. There are paradigms of art, and networks of similarities between works of art, but there is no exhaustive set of conditions for correctly applying this concept. New conditions and cases can always be envisaged, since art is an "open" concept and we can always decide to extend it. Art by its nature is expansive, and a closed definition of art would make creativity impossible. This does not mean that aesthetic theory is worthless: traditional definitions should simply be seen as encouraging us to attend to previously neglected qualities in works of art. They are now best seen as honorific definitions of art. (See also Weitz 1977).

William Kennick (1958) similarly asserted that the assumption that there is some common nature to art or some set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a work of art is a mistake. What makes the question "What is art?" difficult is nothing mysterious about works of art but that the word *art* has a complex logic. Kennick insisted that we know how to separate works of art from other things because we know the correct English use of *art.* If we sent a man into a warehouse full of diverse objects and asked him to pick out all the

works of art, he could do it reasonably well. But if we asked him to pick out all of the objects that fit the criteria of one of the famous definitions of art he would fail, since phrases like "significant form" (which Bell used to define *art*) are even more obscure than art. We know what art is because we know how to use the term *art* correctly, but we cannot produce a simple or even a complex formula to define it.

Maurice Mandelbaum (1965), however, questioned the family resemblance analogy used by Gallie and Weitz, noting that although fortune–telling bears a resemblance to solitaire, it is not then a form of playing cards; that a literal family resemblance requires an underlying genetic connection between members of the family; and that, similarly, although there may not be any directly exhibited properties that distinguish art objects from other things, this does not preclude nonexhibited (perhaps intentional and relational) properties doing so.

When Arthur Danto (1964) introduced the concept of the artworld and George Dickie (1969) the institutional theory of art where art is defined in terms of nonexhibited properties, it seemed that essentialism was back in business. Danto is quite explicit about his essentialism, claiming that "art is always the same" and that there are conditions necessary and sufficient for something to be an artwork (1996). Danto couples his essentialism with historicism: what is a

work at one time cannot be at another, and the essence of art is brought to consciousness through history. [*See* Danto.] Although Dickie does not declare himself an essentialist he does think he can define the concept of art *we* have, where the "we" seems to include at least present-day Americans and maybe Westerners since the eighteenth-century.

Although essentialist, these theories were nonetheless influenced by anti-essentialism. Danto criticized the way that (traditional) essentialism in art criticism inhibited art practice, although he thinks his own theory, with its Hegelian "end of art" thesis, encourages art practice through encouraging pluralism (1992). And, although Dickie provided a series of progressively refined definitions of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, he was skeptical that there is any Platonic essence of art that can be discovered by philosophical reflection or intuition (1984). Also, unlike earlier essentialists, Dickie deliberately limited himself to a classificatory definition of art, leaving out all evaluative components. [*See* Dickie.]

The banner of essentialism in the traditional functionalist mode (in which the definition of art gives the function of art) continued to be carried by Harold Osborne (1955) and Monroe Beardsley (1981) during the height of the anti-essentialist movement and afterward. Both of

these authors attempted to define art in terms of its ability to provide valuable aesthetic experience.

Some theorists are harder to classify. Nelson Goodman (1978) seemed anti-essentialist insofar as he sought to replace the question "What is art?" with "When is art?" Yet, his answer to the latter question pushed him closer to essentialism. For Goodman, something is art when it functions as art, that is, functions as a symbol in a certain way. This would imply that "being a symbol" is a necessary condition of a work of art: indeed, for Goodman, art must either represent, express, or exemplify. Goodman did not give a sufficient condition for art, but he did give five "symptoms of the aesthetic," none of which were necessary, although all together are sufficient. He further suggested that "nontransparency" (the tendency of properties to focus our attention on the symbol rather than on what it symbolizes) might set works of art off from other symbols. [*See* Goodman].

The anti-essentialist banner was carried by Benjamin R. Tilghman (1984) who maintained that it is not even coherent to look for essences. To ask what two or more things have in common outside of all context is just another form of what Wittgenstein called "language gone on holiday." Thus, asking what all games or works of art have in common is unintelligible. Even if they are all "unified" they

are so in different ways. Tilghman later (1989) claimed that there cannot be theories of human practices such as art since there is nothing philosophically significant hidden behind those practices.

Noël. Carroll (1988, 1993) sought to reorient the "What is art?" question away from definition to identification. Art for him is a cultural practice governed by reasons internal to that practice. Cultural practices tend to reproduce themselves in ways that sustain continuity. Identification of new objects as works of art is related to this process. It involves several rational strategies of justification, including repetition, amplification, and repudiation of works already included in the tradition. We identify works of art not by applying formal definitions but by telling stories about their place in a historic narrative.

Richard Shusterman (1992, 1993) proposed a pragmatist aesthetics inspired by John Dewey. (Dewey himself was an early anti-essentialist [1934]. He never gave a definition of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.) Shusterman argued that attempts to define art put it in a box, disenfranchised it, neutralized it, and detached it from the rest of life. His anti-essentialism was directed not only against traditional theories but also against Danto's historical essentialism. Danto simply collapses the philosophy of art into a representation of art history's representation of art, which, in turn, is

inevitably a history of high art (excluding therefore the popular arts.) Pragmatist aesthetics, by contrast, takes an active role in reshaping art, particularly in the direction of overcoming the distinction between high and low art and between art and life.

Anita Silvers (1989) leveled a parallel attack against Danto, arguing that his grounding of aesthetics, interpretation, and art itself in seemingly purely descriptive art history fails because art history cannot escape evaluative aesthetic criteria. Such criteria are relevant, for example, in the selection of objects for historical study as canonical. Art historians, revise history in light of changed evaluations. Thus, insofar as it attempts to gain stability through disassociation of evaluation from theory, essentialist aesthetic theory seems doomed once again.

Jerrold Levinson, somewhat like Dickie, sought to provide a definition of art that captures what the concept of art is at the present time (1990a, b). He wished to describe "our concept of art," by which he meant the one used in enlightened and informed contemporary discourse about art in the West. Although he did not posit an unchanging essence of art, he was an essentialist about the *concept* of art since he provided a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. He argued, against Wittgensteinians, that cultural concepts can have "extractable, fairly serviceable, essences" and that we can

try to tease out the "most central core meaning" for a concept like art. Moreover, he thought his definition captured an essential aspect of artmaking through all periods, at least for the past three thousand years (1996), although the "minimal essence" of art only came to light with the advent of avant-garde art. A short version of his definition is: "an artwork is a thing…that has been seriously intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art – i.e., regard in any *way pre-existing artworks are or were correctly regarded*." (1990b, pp. 38-39.)

Berys Gaut (2000, 2005) contributed to a revival of anti-essentialism by advocating a different interpretation of family resemblance from Weitz's. Rather than resemblance-to-a-paradigm, he favors a view of art as a cluster concept. For Gaut, there are multiple criteria for application of cluster concepts none of which are necessary. It is indeterminate how many of the criteria must apply, but some cases of inclusion and some of exclusion are clear. Thus, although there are no individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for art there are some criteria that are jointly sufficient. There are also disjunctively necessary conditions: some of the criteria must apply for the object to fall under the concept. (There is also one necessary condition: being a product of action.) Gaut has explicitly stated that a cluster account is anti-essentialist. Unlike resemblance-to-paradigm models, cluster theories say what properties are relevant

to whether something is art. One determines which properties are part of the cluster by looking at how the concept is used in the language. Gaut provided a tentative list of pima facie conditions for properties for a cluster account of art: these include possessing positive aesthetic qualities, being expressive of emotion, being intellectually challenging, and five others. But perhaps Gaut's position is not as anti-essentialist as it seems: Stephen Davies (2004) argued that Gaut's view is consistent with disjunctive definitions of art and is itself most plausible when construed in this way. It just shows another way for essentialism to be true. Aaron Meskin (2007) raised another problem, i.e. that a property irrelevant to whether or not something is art could "count toward" something being art on the cluster account. Although Meskin considered a complex additional condition that could save the cluster account he believed it faced many problems. In response to this debate, Francis Longworth and Andrea Scarantino (2010) attempted to replace the cluster account with the sort of disjunctive definition suggested by Davies. Although not exactly an anti-essentialist, Daniel Kaufman argues that the essentialist philosophers who responded to Weitz failed to answer he main concerns (2007).

Those philosophers who attempt a cross-cultural or evolutionary account of art have had their own approaches to the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate. Ellen Dissanyake (1988) saw art

as open-textured where there is a list of attributes which not all are possesses and none of which are necessary. Julius Moravsik (1993) tried to find a way between essentialism and anti-essentialism. He wanted to treat art as a universal category not just as a word needing definition. David Novitz (1998) was more directly anti-essentialist, believing that rigorous definitions do not help us in multi-cultural contexts. Slightly earlier (1996), he argued that definitions of art are not needed to resolve classificatory disputes about art such as the one over whether or not role-playing games can be art: classificatory disputes are not so much about the essence of art as about a variety of normative issues, mainly about the values the artifact or art-form in question exemplifies. Dennis Dutton (2006, 2009) provided a cluster account of art inspired by evolutionary theory and ethnographic sensitivity (he saw art as a natural universal phenomenon, like language). He gave a list of twelve "recognition criteria" for art (including skill, style, novelty, representation, and eight others), none of which (unlike Gaut) by-itself counts towards something being art, although presence of each increases the likelihood that something is art. Dutton didn't say how many of the criteria have to be met, but asserted that if any item had all criteria it would *have* to be art (canonical works such as Rembrandt's *Night Watch* do this).

Disagreeing with Gaut, he saw his cluster account as a definition of art.

Anti-essentialism has played an even stronger role in Continental aesthetics, particularly in poststructuralist and postmodernist thought. Poststructuralism began as a reaction against the essentialism of structuralism (i.e. the belief that there are stable underlying structures that explain human behavior) but was quickly extended to an attack on the entire tradition of Western metaphysics as essentialist. One could say that poststructuralism is defined by its anti-essentialism, a position that extends far beyond denying that there is an essence or definition of art, to denial of any essences whatsoever, of meaning, subject, and humanity itself. (Best, 1991) [*See* Poststructuralism.]

The search for essences was seen by Jacques Derrida (1976) as an example of the fallacious "metaphysics of presence." This was tied to his critique of "logocentrism": the belief that words represent meanings present in the speaker's mind. Meaning, rather, is always and necessarily in the process of being deferred. This would imply that one could never come up with a definition of art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. If one believes that meaning is never determinate or stable, then one is not going to waste energy on trying to arrive at such a definition. Deconstructionists would not even begin

this task, since, they would say, it assumes the existence of a "transcendental signified."

Derrida addresses the "what is art?" question, in an antiessentialist way, in the Lemmata chapter of the Paregon section of *The Truth In Painting* (1978, 1987). There he speaks to the issue by way of interpreting the classic aesthetic texts of Hegel (*Lectures on Aesthetics*) and Heidegger (*Origin of the Work of Art*). He is skeptical that the word, concept, or thing called "art" has a "one and naked" unity and truth that can be revealed through history, and he questions traditional conceptual oppositions (i.e. form vs. content) already contained in such questions as "what is art?" and "what is the meaning art?" When a philosopher asks such questions without transforming form, or destroying them in their form, he has already taken on logocentric assumptions. [*See* Derrida]

Jean-François Lyotard also takes an anti-essentialist approach to aesthetics. His *Discours/Figure* (1971) in preferring sense and experience to abstractions and concepts, in critiquing Western philosophy back to Plato, in privileging figure over discourse, and in developing (following Freud's concepts of life and death instincts) a philosophy of desire, implicitly opposes all definitional projects. His critique of "grand narratives" or "metanarratives" (such as Christianity and Marxism) (1984) is also anti-essentialist. For example, it would

rule out Danto's Hegelian historicist version of essentialism. His emphasis on desire as providing the condition for creativity, and his view that art as representing desire in an attack on reason and theory, is surprisingly similar to Weitz's notion that if art were defined the conditions for creativity would be closed off. This can also be found in his association of the postmodern with the "pagan": i.e. absence of rules, criteria and principle, and a need for experimentation. All of this, as with analytic anti-essentialists, is associated with the avant-garde art of the time insofar as it tends to dissolve the distinction between art and non-art. (See Best, 1991)

The dialectic between essentialism and anti-essentialism has played a central role in contemporary aesthetics. Although very few would hold to a Platonic/Aristotelian essentialism that takes essences to be real entities that are also unchanging, the view that important aesthetic concepts such as art can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions relativized in some way to history, or in terms of something more modest such as necessary or sufficient conditions alone, is still attractive to many, especially in the analytic tradition. Nonetheless, this *conceptual* essentialism has been under consistent attack by anti-essentialists influenced not only by Wittgenstein but also by Dewey and poststructuralist thought. Institutional definitions like Dickie's, and historical definitions like Levinson's, have been

resistant to such attacks largely because they share with anti-essentialism a skepticism concerning the traditional functionalist approach to defining art (see Davies, 1991.) Cross-cultural and evolutionary accounts aesthetics and art have, however, provided another important avenue for anti-essentialist thought.

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