

The Ontology of Art

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April 26, 2005

1 ONTOLOGY AND ITS METHODOLOGY

1.1 The Basic Question

Ontology is the study of what exists and the nature of the most fundamental categories into which those existents fall. Ontologists offer a map of reality, one divided into such broad, overlapping territories as physical and mental, concrete and abstract, universal and particular. Such a map provides the setting for further philosophical investigation. Ontologists of art seek to locate works of art in this wider terrain, to say where in our universe they fit in. Their governing question is, thus, “What kind of thing is a work of art?”

1.2 Methodological Constraints

This might seem a hopeless question, for the category of artworks is wildly heterogeneous. It includes paintings, poetry, dances, buildings, pop songs, earthworks, novels, plays, installations, musical improvisations, films, and much more besides. On its face, art is not itself an ontological category, but rather a status enjoyed by a host of objects of different sorts. Those who propose definitions of “art” attempt to clarify this status, but none suggest that art is a fundamental category of existence. Still, even if art is a diverse category, one must recall just how broad the fundamental ontological categories are. Atoms, skyscrapers, and legislatures are all particulars; murders, picnics, and victories are all events. Because of this, one can search for patterns of high-level commonality among the artworks with some hope that an accurate ontology of art would ultimately assign them to only a few categories, even just two or one. Such ontologies are, respectively, pluralist, dualist, and monist in character.

How does one go about determining how many and to which categories artworks belong? Ontologists of art have largely adopted a pragmatic picture of ontology rooted in a tradition running prominently through Quine, Davidson, and Lewis. On this picture, the answers to such questions are constrained by the practice of art itself: What people do, say, and think in the processes of making, appreciating, and criticizing art. These practices, or at least some rational reconstruction of them, ought largely to fix the sorts of objects with which they are concerned. While there has often been too narrow a focus on

Western practices, particularly in the case of music, recent work shows a trend toward a richer diet of examples, e.g. (S. Davies 2001) on non-Western music and (Gracyk 1996) on popular music.

On this conception, ontology is a descriptive, not a prescriptive, enterprise. One should not expect the ontology of art to deliver evaluative judgments, as opposed to explaining how such judgments and the reasons behind them are possible and make sense. So too, one must avoid the temptation to embed one's critical views in one's ontology, so as to make properly aesthetic questions appear metaphysical. Rather, the task is to provide a theoretical background against which properly aesthetic questions can be addressed, one broad and flexible enough to allow formulation of a wide variety of views and arguments, precisely that dizzy variety of claims which constitute our artistic practices.

2 ARTWORKS AS PARTICULARS

Such attention to practice creates considerable pressure to adopt at least a dualist ontology of art, in the sense that our practices appear to embed a distinction between singular and multiple forms of art. Singular artworks are unique, occurring at only one place at a time. Paintings, collages, carved sculptures, and Polaroids are typical examples of singular works. Multiple artworks are those which are capable of having more than one occurrence in different places at the same time. For example, a novel may have many copies, a play many performances, a film many screenings, and a photograph many prints. Each of the occurrences is, in some way, a full-fledged presentation of the work.

This distinction appears to doom the simplest thought, that all works of art are physical particulars. It may be plausible to claim that a painting is a particular material object, or that a jazz performance is a particular physical event, but one cannot identify Alfred Steiglitz's photograph *The Steerage* with any one of its prints or Peter Schaffer's play *Equus* with any one of its performances. As Wollheim (1980) first pointed out, the occurrences are potentially many, and one thing cannot be identical to many distinct things. So too, such works survive the destruction or passing of their occurrences, even such epistemologically privileged occurrences as manuscripts and holographs. They must be some other sort of thing.

Other views would identify multiple artworks with more unusual particulars. Most straightforwardly, one could claim that multiple artworks are sets. Sets are collective particulars. For any collection of things whatsoever, we may also speak of another, abstract individual which is the set of those things, its members. Thus, the entire run of prints of *The Steerage* forms a set, and one might say that *The Steerage* simply is that set of prints. While this avoids identifying *The Steerage* with any one physical object, the proposal falls afoul of our practices. Multiple artworks could have had more, fewer, or difference occurrences than they actually do. In contrast, our best understanding of sets requires that a set could not have had more, fewer, or different members; its identity is given by its membership. The set proposal is sometimes confused

with the claim that multiple artworks are classes, collections sharing a common feature, which avoids this problem but is properly understood as a variety of type-theory, discussed below.

The set proposal faces an additional difficulty. Sets are abstract objects, not located in time or space, and are thus incapable of causal interaction. According to practice, however, our primary epistemic connection to most, if not all, artworks is perceptual; we see and hear them. Since perception is a causal process, it is unclear how our epistemic practices are to be explained and justified. While we would be in perceptual contact with occurrences of works, which are concrete, our only connection to the multiple works themselves would seem to be intellectual.

A variation of the set proposal appeals to sums instead of sets. (Caplan and Matheson 2004) Like sets, sums are collective particulars, only conceived in terms of parthood instead of membership. Individuals which together form a sum are literally parts of a single whole. A multiple artwork might be identified with the sum of all its occurrences, a single discontinuous object spread out in time and space. Because sums are themselves concrete objects, the sum proposal appears to avoid difficulties with causation and perception. However, the modal problem persists. The identity of a sum is given by its parts, and a sum could not have had different parts as an artworks could have had different occurrences.

Another unusual particular view, attributed to Croce (1909) and Collingwood (1938), holds that all artworks are mental particulars, ideas in the minds of artists of which physical manifestations are only expressions. While this monistic view avoids identifying multiple works with diverse and ephemeral physical things, it is also starkly at odds with our epistemic practices. While artists would enjoy direct access to their works, on a par with their access to their own beliefs and pains, the view requires that audiences have only indirect, testimonial contact with works, on a par with your access to my headache; I can tell you about it or express my pain, but you cannot witness it yourself. This thought abandons the objectivity and publicity of artworks we take for granted and has been roundly rejected.

3 ARTWORKS AS UNIVERSALS

Most ontologists of art have abandoned the thought that multiple works of art are particulars. Instead, they identify multiple works with one or another variety of universal. In the broadest sense of that term, universals are those things which are capable of having instances, usually more than one in different places at the same time, all of which share some common nature or satisfy some common condition. It is immediately tempting to explain the aesthetic distinction between singular and multiple artworks in terms of the metaphysical distinction between particulars and universals. One could say that singular works are particulars, multiple works are universals, and occurrences of those multiple works are their instances.

Ontologists of art who appeal to universals face a further issue. Universals are conceived of in two ways, either as real or merely nominal. A realist maintains they exist in the same sense in which ordinary concrete objects do, only not in space and time. A nominalist, such as Goodman (1968), rejects the literal existence of such abstract objects and insists that talk of universals is legitimate only insofar as we can understand such talk as a shorthand for talk about concrete objects.

3.1 The Type-Theory

Many distinguish different sorts of universal—properties, classes, kinds, types, Platonic Forms, Aristotelian universals, Fregean concepts—based on subtle differences in their alleged behaviors and prefer to identify multiple artworks with a certain variety of universal because of those differences. The most popular approach, originating with Wollheim (1980), identifies multiple works with types.

The term “type” comes from Peirce’s (1933: 242) semantic distinction between “type” and “token” senses of words. In its token sense, a word is used to refer to a particular occurrence; in its type sense, it refers to that of which tokens are occurrences. The word “photograph,” for instance, enjoys this type-token ambiguity and can refer to either particular prints or that of which they are prints, viz. photographic works. Wollheim points out that a characteristic pattern of predication comes with Peirce’s ambiguity. What can be said of all well-formed tokens of type can be said of the type as well. If every well-formed performance of *Hamlet* has five acts, it is also true to say that *Hamlet* itself has five acts.

The type-theory moves beyond these merely semantic observations to posit a variety of universal, a type, to which these words refer when used in their type senses. Types are thus said to be both property-like, in having token instances, and object-like, in serving as a locus for further predication and identification with other objects, such as artworks. Supplying the types to be identified with artworks is a matter of providing their identity conditions, i.e. when they are identical or distinct. For types, this requires saying when two well-formed tokens do or do not count as tokens of the same type. Applied to multiple artworks, the idea is simple. If one could specify what it takes for two photographic prints to count as prints of the same photograph, or two performances to count as performances of the same play, then one would have specified what sort of type a photograph or play is. Technically, one offers an equivalence relation, such as *has the same pictorial structure as* or *contains the same words in the same order as*, which partitions the domain of concrete objects into equivalence classes which are, in turn, treated as objects in their own right.

There are many conflicting proposals about which features of tokens are relevant to the identity of works in various artforms (i.e. about which equivalence relation is correct), and thus about with which types artworks are to be identified. The type-theory is really a family of views which share a common framework. These disputes are, again, responsive to our practices. Where a feature makes a difference to what we say or think about a work, there is a

prima facie claim that the feature is relevant to the identity of such works.

To be clear, there are two things going on here. One is an investigation of the individuation conditions of various works of art, an inquiry of interest to all ontologists of art, not just type-theorists. Another is the type theorist's claim that the answers to the individuation questions about artworks serve to introduce the objects, types, with which the works are to be identified. Type-theories may be categorized by the individuating views used to introduce their types.

3.2 Intrinsic Features

All agree that multiple works are individuated, at least in part, by the intrinsic qualitative and structural features of their occurrences. What two prints look like or what two performances sound like is clearly relevant to the question of whether they are prints or performances of the same work. Not all intrinsic features are relevant. While the words and the order in which they appear is crucial for copies of a novel, the typeface in which they are set is irrelevant. According to some, intrinsic features are all that matter to individuation, as Kivy (1993) holds of musical works. These individuating views generate a type-theory on which works are identical to the internal structures shared by their tokens. A novel might be a lexical structure, a symphony a structure of sounds, and a photograph a certain visual or pictorial structure.

There is a further question here about the "level of description" at which such qualitative, structural features are relevant to work identity. The order of sounds in a musical performance might be picked out by a low-level, physical description using, say, the vocabulary of physics or acoustics. But, as S. Davies (2001) points out, this is not the level at which commonalities between performances of the same piece emerge. Rather, musical works are organized in terms of such higher-level qualitative structures as notes, melodies, harmonies, themes, and the like. Two performances which do share high-level structure might differ considerably in their low-level realizations of these features, and so it is the former which are relevant to work identity.

3.3 Extrinsic Features

While some hold that only intrinsic features are relevant to work identity, others add extrinsic, historical features of tokens to the list. For instance, two photographic prints might be intrinsically just alike even though they are prints of different photographs. The identity conditions for photographs must make reference to the causal history of the prints and not just their intrinsic, qualitative features.

Most of the pressure for this extension comes from recent "contextualist" arguments that the historical context of a work's production can affect its aesthetic features. Walton (1970) argues that the aesthetic properties of a work depend on its genre, and that genre, in turn, is determined by contextual features. Others, e.g. (Levinson 1990), offer thought experiments in which distinct

artists happen to make exactly similar works in different contexts and argue that the resulting works would have different aesthetic features and would thus, by Leibniz's Law, be distinct works. Even among those who accept that artworks are individuated by their historical context may disagree on whether the identity of the artist makes a difference, or whether it is only the wider art-historical context which matters. (Levinson 1990, S. Davies 2001) The types such individuating views give rise to can be thought of as contextualized structures, for they demand both a certain intrinsic structure and extrinsic history of their tokens.

In the case of performed works, like plays and symphonies, the causal history of tokens has extra import because it includes the intentions of the performers and composers. Many suggest that which piece a performance is of is largely determined by which piece the performers intend to perform. A cover band, for instance, may perform a song in a way which has little acoustically in common with performances by the original artist. What appears to be doing the work is not so much qualitative similarity amongst the performances but the intentions of the band members to perform that song, assuming such intentions are reasonable ones, e.g. to perform a song with which they are familiar, to abide by prevailing musical conventions, and so on.

3.4 Normativity of Works

Appealing to intentions, and causal history in general, promises to resolve a puzzle facing all type theories: What to make of the distinction between correct and incorrect occurrences of a work? Recall that type theorists seek the features common to instances of a single work. It is clear, however, that some occurrences of a work will lack important qualitative features because they are incorrect in some way. On some approaches, the identity conditions are so strict that no incorrect instances count as instances of a work at all. Goodman's (1968) account of musical works demands that performances comply precisely with a score in order to count as performances of that work. Play one wrong note in an attempted performance of "The Star Spangled Banner" and it is not a performance of that song at all. Such views clearly deviate from our practices, which accept a distinction between correct and incorrect performances of a work. Unsurprisingly, Goodman is one of the few who insist that ontology is not answerable to our practices. The point of appealing to causal history and intentions is simple. Even if correct and incorrect occurrences may have few qualitative similarities, all share the extrinsic feature of resulting-from-an-intention-to-perform-work- W or printed-from-negative- N .

Another approach to the same problem is offered by Wolterstorff (1980). Instead of appealing to historical features, he suggests that some of the identifying qualitative features of types are not descriptive, but normative. Thus, a feature common to instances of a work may not be that all are F , but that all should be F (or would be, if they were correct). Other features may be counted essential, in that all instances must possess it in order to count as instances.

3.5 Works for Performance and not for Performance

Several recent writers have suggested that type theorists will need to appeal to two (or more) systematically different sorts of types in order to track a distinction between those works which are intended for performance and those which are not. (Carroll 1998, S. Davies 2001) Some arts, like theater and much music, generate work-occurrences as the result of performance. It is the nature of these arts to demand that one or more individuals bring a script or score to life and, in so doing, provide the work with an interpretation. In contrast, other multiple arts like film, literature, printmaking, and photography generate their occurrences without this extra interpretive act. Rather, it is a matter of producing the occurrence from some sort of template or matrix via some technical process of reproduction. While both sorts of artwork would count as types, the systematically different production processes leading to their respective tokens would be reflected in their identity conditions, and thus we would find that multiple works were types of of two sorts with very different profiles.

Davies (2001) also introduces a further, useful distinction among performed works, that between thick and thin works. He points out that while all performed works require interpretation, the amount of slack left to the performers varies widely. Some works, thick ones, specify more of what must be done to perform it, either because the artists or the surrounding artistic practices demand it. Other works, thin ones, leave more up to the performer. So for example, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* would count as much thicker than Mozart's Divertimento in D, K. 136 because Stravinsky specifies to a greater degree what the performer must do to execute it. The distinction has the potential to defuse some apparent disagreement between type-theorists about which features of works are relevant to their identity, for in many cases, the answer will simply vary with the thickness of the works at issue.

3.6 Event-Types

A more radical type-theoretic proposal is due to Currie (1988). Unlike other type-theorists, Currie is a monist, claiming that all artworks are types of a unusual sort. He thus rejects the distinction between singular and multiple arts, and claims that apparently singular arts like painting are, in principle, multiple. The types with which Currie identifies artworks are not, unlike previous proposals, types whose tokens are objects like prints or events like performances, but rather the particular creative actions of artists. For Currie, the work is not a physical object produced, or a performance, or even a structure that such objects and performances may share, but rather the way in which an artist arrived at that structure. Works are thus action-types: an individual's arriving at a certain structure via a certain "heuristic," by which Currie means the path which led the artist to that structure, including both internal elements of the artist's thought and external elements of the art-historical context influencing the artist. The various prints and performances which we perceive are not, for Currie, tokens of works, but instances of the structure the artist arrives at which

allow us to appreciate, in part, the real work, which is the way the artist selected that structure.

4 TROUBLES WITH THE TYPE-THEORY

While the type-theory is enormously influential and, given all its potential variations, very powerful, it is susceptible to a number of important criticisms. One we have seen before in relation to the works-as-sets proposal. Types, like sets, are abstract objects and are, unlike their concrete tokens, incapable of causal interaction. If works are types, then they are not directly perceptible but can only be grasped in thought.

One might also wonder how it is that types can bear some of the very same properties which their concrete tokens do, as the sharing of predicates suggests, even though they are not in time and space. How could an abstract object be literally over an hour long, red, or sweet-sounding? Wollterstorff (1980) suggests that the shared predicates are used “analogically,” i.e. shift their meaning in a systematic way when applied to works. On this account, while it is correct to say both “*Hamlet* has five acts,” and “This performance of *Hamlet* has five acts,” only the latter is meant literally. In the first case, what one means is that the type is one which has five-acted tokens.

A related problem has received more extended attention. If types are not susceptible to causal interaction, it is difficult to understand how they could be created or destroyed. Types, it would seem, exist sempiternally (at every moment) or eternally (outside of time altogether). And yet our practices seem centrally to embed the thoughts that artists create their works and that these works can be destroyed. Type-theorists have two avenues of response. Some deny that our practices do embed these claims. Kivy (1993) and Dodd (2000, 2002) claim that the point of “creation” talk in our practices concerns the creativity of artists, not literal creation. Such talk serves to mark something we value in the activity of artists, but something which we find also in cases in which there is no creation. They claim that making art is more like making a discovery; it can be creative, but need not involve the creation of any new thing.

The second avenue is to claim that some abstract objects can be created after all. Giving this response demands giving up the most orthodox conception of universals, on which they exist eternally, in favor of some less-standard conception. One, influenced by the Aristotelian tradition, holds that universals exist only when instantiated. If types have Aristotelian existence conditions, then one can bring a type into existence by bringing a concrete token of it into existence. While promising, this approach has difficulty accounting for the fact that we accept the existence of works which are not currently, have not yet, or will never be performed or otherwise tokened.

Another approach is due to Levinson (1990). He claims that types exist when tokens are possible, not actual as the Aristotelian holds. On this picture, some types will exist sempiternally, viz. those which can be tokened at any time like the type *square* or a structure of sounds. However, Levinson argues

that some types cannot be tokened before a certain time because the tokens require a certain historical context to exist, and these types can be created. In particular, he argues that multiple artworks are “indicated types.” The idea is that an artist picks out a certain uncreated structure, “indicating” it by an act of composition, and thus creates a new type, *structure-S-as-indicated-by-individual-A-at-t*. This derivative type cannot have tokens before time t , and so we can speak of its being created at t by the artist’s act of indication.

Finally, some have tried to prise the creation issue apart from the causal inertness issue. Caplan and Matheson (2004) point out that even if sets are causally inert, some of them seem to come into existence. There seems no way for the singleton set whose only member is Socrates to exist before Socrates himself, but this means that the set comes into existence even though it cannot casually interact.

Another problem with the type-theory concerns the modal profiles of types as opposed to artworks. (Rohrbaugh 2003) Our practices appear to accept that artworks are modally flexible, which is to say that an artwork could have been a little different than it actually is, had the artist made it that way. A painter could have added another stroke, a poet could have chosen a different word, or a composer could have used a few different notes, and the result would have been the very same work. The problem is that types are not modally flexible in this way, for what is predicable of a type is necessarily predicable of it.

Recall that a type is introduced by some relation which holds among all and only its tokens, as *same shape* hold among all token squares. This relation extends to merely possible tokens too, as the type *square* has both actual and merely possible tokens, all of which share the same shape. Because of this, it is incoherent to speak of a type which actually requires its tokens to be F but might have required its tokens to be G instead; those G -ish tokens could only be tokens of some distinct type. For example, it is plausible to think that Austen could have written *Emma* so that the fourth word was “rich” instead of “wealthy.” But any type which requires the fourth word of its tokens to be “wealthy” could not count those counterfactual copies as correct copies of *Emma*, which is what they would have been had she written it that way.

All these criticisms of the type-theory share a common theme. In our practices, we treat both singular and multiple artworks as what one might call “historical individuals,” things in time just as we are. We create them, destroy them, and interact with them. They change and could have been different than they are had things gone differently. Contextualist insights have only reinforced the importance of treating artworks as things within and dependent on their historical contexts. The type-theorist, by explaining the distinction between singular and multiple works in terms of the particular-universal distinction, is forced to identify multiple works with static, inflexible, abstract items which do not stand with us in time as the singular works do.

5 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

While disputes among type-theorists and between them and their critics have been the dominant dialectic in recent ontology of art, it is worth briefly mentioning some recent work which attempts to move beyond it. Common to these approaches is a return to the thought that all artworks are particulars of some sort. Each attempts to offer some new picture of the relation between multiple works and their occurrences.

D. Davies (2004) offers a twist on Currie's idea that artworks are event-types. According to Davies, all artworks are indeed events, but particular token events rather than types of events. For Davies, the real work is the process, or series of actions, by which an artist arrives at his or her product, and not just the product itself. The end product, e.g. a painted canvas, is merely the "focus of appreciation" of the work, in which the artist's ideas and efforts are embedded and through which we can come to appreciate the artist's achievement. Distinctions among works, i.e. singular-multiple and performed-unperformed, are handled as distinctions among kinds of foci. Some foci are themselves physical objects, others are templates from which physical objects can be minted or specifications requiring further enactment to reach the point at which appreciation is possible. By identifying works with particular bits of history, the artist's making, he avoids the epistemic, causal, and modal problems of type-theories.

A different strategy for reconceiving the singular-multiple artwork distinction is taken up by Dilworth (2004). He suggests that the relation between a multiple artwork and its occurrences is not that of a universal to its instances, but one of representation. Thus the model for the relation is not the metaphysical redness-to-red-things but the more ordinary portrait-and-subject, a relation between particulars. Of course, in the case of multiple artworks, the thing represented is not a concrete individual but some abstract thing. Dilworth suggests we understand what is represented, the works, as bits of representational content of some broadly conceived sort. Dilworth argues that this model can be extended to singular artworks as well, providing a monistic theory.

Finally, Rohrbaugh (2003) suggests that taking multiple works seriously as historical particulars requires that we recognize a new sort of particular, a "high-level" particular as opposed to an abstract one. The thought is that there are some non-material historical objects, subject to creation, destruction, change, and the like in virtue of how things go with some lower level objects on which they ontologically depend for their existence and qualities. Such objects are sustained by the causal flow of lower level objects "beneath" them. He suggests that things like clubs, governments, and species of animals are in a similar ontological position. In the case of a multiple artwork like a photograph, the story of the work is fixed by the historical chain of negatives and prints on which it depends. The chain of supporting items are the work's embodiments. But not all items in this chain will count as occurrences of the work. A negative is not a occurrence of a photograph, nor a film of a dance, though these things might be part of a sustaining causal flow. He suggests that each multiple artform makes use of some distinguished relational predicate, e.g. "print of," "performance

of,” and “copy of,” the job of which is to pick out those items from the causal flow which display the qualities of the work and are relevant to appreciation and criticism.

6 RELATED TOPICS

- Definitions of Art
- Contextualism

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8 FURTHER READING

Goehr, L. (1992) *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Goehr challenges the assumption that all art is a matter of works by arguing that the concept of a work is historically recent.

Ridley, A. (2003) “Against Musical Ontology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 100: 203–220. Ridley argues against the usefulness of ontology and the possibility of a critically neutral stance from which to pursue it.

9 BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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