

Art: What it Is and Why it Matters
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Introduction

We do not, in general, expect a definition of some concept to elucidate the value of the things to which it applies. For example, we do not generally expect a definition of knowledge to explain why it is valuable to know things rather than merely to truly believe them. Nevertheless, as Edward Craig notes, an adequate definition of knowledge should be regarded as a prolegomenon to a further inquiry into what general human needs served by the concept of knowledge account for its widespread use and, to the extent that existing definitions of knowledge ignore this further question, the complexities they introduce to accommodate our intuitions about the extension and the intension of the concept may impede subsequent attempts to explain its value (Craig 1990: 2). Likewise, definitions of art that ignore the question of its value may impede subsequent attempts to illuminate that value. Clive Bell claimed that the problem of identifying the quality that distinguishes artworks from all other kinds of objects is the “central problem of aesthetics” (Bell 1914: 3). Jerrold Levinson likewise claims that the problem is “probably the most venerable in aesthetics” (Levinson 1979: 232). However, definitions that ignore the question of why we value art may rob this question of much of its philosophical significance.

Evaluative definitions of art pursue the projects of definition and of value elucidation simultaneously, by defining artworks as things with value of a certain kind. However, they have the undesirable consequence that to be art is necessarily to be good art. By so closely associating what it is to be art with its value, they preclude the possibility of bad art. What is needed is a descriptive definition of art that is able to accommodate the existence of bad art, while illuminating the value of good art. Craig proposes to address the task of defining knowledge by beginning with a hypothesis about the human needs served by the concept of knowledge, and then asking what conditions would govern the application of a concept that played that role. My approach in this paper is somewhat similar. Starting with the hypothesis that artworks are the products of institutions that serve certain human social needs, I then go on to identify the conditions something must meet in order to be an artwork, and then examine what these conditions reveal about the value of good art.

1 Functionalist Approaches

Historically, the most common approach to the task of defining art has been functionalist. In their simplest form, functionalist theories hold that something is art iff it has a certain function. Proposals for the function definitive of art include having aesthetic value, having valuable formal characteristics, expressing thoughts or feelings, and embodying meanings. Functionalist accounts promise not only to explain what it is for something to be art, but also to explain its value. They typically hold that the value of art consists in its performance of the function in terms of which they define art.

A problem that faces all these proposals is that many artworks simply do not seem to have the functions at issue. Avant garde works in particular pose a problem for many functionalist accounts. In addition to such works as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and Michelangelo's *David*, which perform at least some of the above functions, the category of artworks includes works such as Duchamp's *Fountain*, Manzoni's *Merde d'Artiste*, Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, and John Cage's *4'33"*. Such avant garde works comprise counterexamples to functionalist accounts which claim that all artworks have aesthetic value, or valuable formal characteristics, or express thoughts or feelings.

One response to this problem is to loosen the connection between something's being an artwork and its having a function. For example, one could claim that something is art iff: it belongs to a type that is typically intended to have a certain function or it is of a kind such that something is good of that kind if and only if it has that function. Such accounts define art in terms of a function without insisting that every artwork must have the function at issue. This enables accounts which define art in terms of functions such as the above to accommodate avant garde works.

However, there is a cost to adopting this response. Functionalist accounts that deny that all artworks perform a certain function are typically presented as descriptive definitions which hold that what distinguishes good art from bad is that good artworks fulfil the function at issue, whereas bad artworks do not. Insofar as they are able to illuminate the value of art, accounts that take this line accommodate avant garde works only by construing them as bad art. However, some avant garde works seem to be *good art*.

An alternative response is to insist that, contrary to appearances, there is some function common to all artworks. Advocates of this approach face the problem of identifying some function that both traditional and avant garde works perform (or that *good* traditional and *good* avant garde works perform) but that things that are not artworks do not perform (or are not typically intended to perform, or are not of a kind such that they are good of that kind if they perform that function). What makes this problem difficult to surmount is that any function broad enough to accommodate both traditional and avant garde works is likely either to be performed not just by artworks but also by things that are not artworks, or to be specified too imprecisely either to clearly include all artworks or all good artworks, or to rule out things that are clearly not artworks. In both cases, because the function at issue does not distinguish clearly between artworks and things that are not artworks, the proposed functionalist definition fails. For example, Arthur Danto claims that both traditional and avant garde artworks have meanings. In response to counterexamples proposed by George Dickie, he attributes meanings to the works in question and claims "give me an example, and I will deal with it" (Danto 2000: 133). This response is inadequate. That it is possible to attribute meanings to all artworks does not suffice to show that they actually *have* such meanings, or that the meanings they have differ in kind from the meanings of newspaper reports, conversations, instruction manuals and other things that are not artworks. To do this, one must provide an account of what it is for an artwork to have meaning of the kind distinctive of (good) artworks,

and then show both that all (good) artworks meet the account's criteria, and that all things that are not artworks do not. Danto fails to do this.

2 Procedural Approaches

Procedural accounts construe the procedure by which things are produced, rather than the function they serve, as essential to determining whether or not they are artworks. Things produced by a single procedure may not share any common function. Stephen Davies notes that practices or procedures that are developed to produce things with a certain function may, once established, continue even when their products cease to serve that function (S. Davies 1991: 31). When this happens, the products of a procedure will no longer have a common function, but will be united only by the shared procedure by which they are produced. While procedural accounts are consistent with the claim that artworks once had a common function, they construe the practices or procedures by which artworks are made to be their only essential feature.

Institutional and historical definitions are the two most prominent procedural approaches. Institutional definitions hold that art making is an essentially institutional activity, such that whether or not something is art depends on whether or not members of the institution of art deem it art, or are prepared to accept it as art (Dickie 1969). They hold, therefore, that the practice of art making necessarily occurs within the institutional context of the artworld. Historical definitions hold that something is an artwork iff it is intended to be regarded in at least some way in which artworks of the past were correctly or standardly regarded (Levinson 1979). New ways of correctly regarding artworks may emerge because new artworks need be intended to be regarded *only in part* in ways correct or standard for artworks of the past (Levinson 1979). Because there may be other ways in which such works are intended to be regarded or are correctly or standardly regarded, the introduction of new artworks introduces new regards able to ground sufficient conditions for arthood. This account is essentially historical in attempting to define art at a given time by reference to an uncontroversial body of past art.

Both these procedural accounts allow enormous latitude in the sorts of things that can be art. Because it is generally assumed that members of the institution of art may deem art or accept as art anything whatsoever, the institutional approach allows things of any sort to be art. Likewise, on the historical approach, works that are intended to be regarded in one of the ways in which past art is correctly regarded may also be intended to be regarded in almost any further respect, with the consequence that this further respect then becomes one of the ways in which past art is correctly regarded. This latitude enables these procedural accounts to accommodate avant garde works, and thus gives them an important advantage over functionalist accounts.

Nevertheless, procedural accounts also suffer some important disadvantages relative to functionalist accounts. Firstly, they tend to be circular. Institutional definitions define art by appeal to the institution of art, but do not go on to define that institution independently of the notion of art. Historical definitions define art by appeal to past art, without providing a reductive account of first art. This circularity does not deprive these accounts of explanatory value altogether. Dickie claims that his non-reductive institutional account

explains the relations between the concepts of an artwork, an artist, the artworld, an artworld system, and an artworld public (Dickie 2000: 102), and Levinson claims that his historical definition enables us to identify from a body of past artworks those works that are art now (Levinson 1979).

Whatever one's view of the merits of such circular accounts, there remains a further respect in which procedural accounts are inferior to functionalist accounts. The very arbitrariness that enables them to accommodate avant garde artworks precludes them from elucidating the *value* of art. Presented as evaluative definitions, they are implausible. The mere fact that something bears the requisite relation to either the institution of art or past art does not suffice to make it good art, since a great many things we consider bad art meet the proposed criteria. Such definitions are plausible only when presented as descriptive. However, unlike descriptive functionalist definitions, they lack even the potential to explain what makes some artworks good. They are utterly unilluminating about either why we care about art, or why it plays the role that it does in our lives. Such accounts therefore make it difficult to see why we should be interested in the phenomenon of art in the first place. Instead, by construing art status as arbitrary, they call into doubt the claim that it does matter.

My aim, in this paper, is to develop a non-circular procedural account of art that is able to explain the value of good artworks. In the next section I evaluate a range of recent responses to the problem of defining art. In section four, I outline John Searle's account of institutions and institutional facts. In section five, I argue that Searle's account shows that the existence of all institutions is due to their being perceived by their participants to perform some humanly valuable function, and identify the functions to which the existence of art institutions is due. I then use these functions, in section six, to provide a reductive institutional definition of art. Finally, in section seven, I examine the account's consequences for the value of good art.

3 Recent Approaches

The claim that art status is conferred by agents operating within art institutions is central to many previous institutional accounts. On Dickie's earliest elaboration of the institutional approach, art is produced by a process whereby artefacts have the status of candidate for appreciation conferred on them by people acting on behalf of the social institution of the artworld (Dickie 1971) (see also (Dickie 1969)). Stephen Davies objects that this account places no restrictions on who can confer art status on objects. He suggests that a non-circular institutional definition of art could be provided by explaining what it is for an agent to have the requisite institutional authority to confer art status (S. Davies 1991: 112). An adequate institutional definition, he claims, should provide an account of the institutional roles that carry that authority, identifying their boundaries and limitations, conditions for occupancy, and the circumstances under which they change (S. Davies 1991: 94).

Stephen Davies implicitly assumes that art making, like marrying people or sentencing them to jail, involves the performance of what Searle calls *declarative illocutionary acts* (Searle 1979). Declarations are alone among illocutionary acts in having the power to

bring about an alteration to the status or condition of the things to which they refer simply in virtue of their successful performance (Searle 1979: 17). When a celebrant says to a man and a woman “I pronounce you man and wife”, they are thereby married. If a judge utters the words “I sentence you to three years’ jail” in the appropriate circumstances, you are thereby sentenced to three years’ jail. The performance of declarations involves the exercise of authority. One cannot perform the act of marrying unless one is a priest or a celebrant, and one cannot sentence someone to jail unless one is a judge or a magistrate. Similarly, Davies assumes, there is some act whose successful performance enables those with the requisite authority to make something a work of art.

Declarations depend on the existence of extra-linguistic institutions in order to bring about these alterations to the status of their objects. Only in virtue of the institution of marriage does a celebrant’s saying “I pronounce you man and wife” effect a marriage, and only in virtue of the institution of the law does a judge’s saying “I sentence you to three years’ jail” bring it about that you are sentenced. The claim that art status conferral involves the performance of declarations therefore construes art as an essentially institutional phenomenon.

Stephen Davies does not actually carry out the task of analysing the institutional roles that carry the authority to confer art status. Nevertheless, even if this task were undertaken, it is unlikely to result in an adequate non-circular definition of art. Even assuming, with Davies, that art is the product of declarations, explaining what it is for an agent to have the requisite institutional authority to confer art status will not result in an adequate institutional definition of art. The authority required to perform a declaration can change over time. While it used to be that only priests could marry people, for example, celebrants have now been granted this authority. It is implausible that all art institutions at all times share the same authority roles.

This problem can be overcome, Stephen Davies believes, by explaining how the current structure and authority roles of the institution of art are determined by its previous structure and the wider social context (S. Davies 1991: 95). However, the way in which the prior structure of an art institution interacts with the wider social context to determine its current structure and authority roles is a contingent matter. The wider social factors that affect the development of art institutions include the other institutions with which they interact. For example, throughout their histories, the structures and authority roles of art institutions have been affected by their interactions with both property and religious institutions. The nature and effects of these interactions depend, not just on the historical structure of art institutions, but on the historical structures of these other institutions. Like those of art institutions, these structures are contingent. It is implausible, therefore, that it will prove possible to provide any general account of how the successive structures and authority roles of art institutions are determined by its previous structures and the wider social context.

Both Robert Stecker and David Davies attempt to combine aspects of both functionalism and proceduralism in a way that overcomes the limitations of each. Stecker argues that something is a work of art at a certain time, where that time is no earlier than the time at

which it was made, iff either (a) it is in what counts as one of the central art forms at that time and is made with the intention of fulfilling a function that art has at that time, or (b) irrespective of whether it is in a central art form or was intended to fulfil such a function, it is an artefact that achieves excellence in fulfilling such a function (Stecker 1997: 50).

This account is like historical accounts and unlike functionalist accounts in accommodating the fact that the functions artworks perform change over time. By allowing that the functions that traditional works perform may enable them to meet the criteria for being art relative to one time and that the functions that avant garde works perform may enable them to meet the criteria for being art relative to another time, Stecker's account explains why both kinds of works have a claim to art status despite lacking a common function. Moreover, he suggests that both may count as art relative to a single time because, in determining what counts as art now, we "tend to be maximally charitable" by admitting both works that meet the criteria for being art relative to the present time and works that meet the criteria for being art relative to the time at which they were produced (Stecker 1997: 53). However, the account is like functionalist accounts and unlike Levinson's historical account in allowing the functions works actually perform to take precedence over the intentions with which they were produced in determining whether or not they are art, as the second disjunct of Stecker's account makes clear.

While it arguably overcomes functionalism's inability to identify some feature or features distinctive of both traditional and avant garde art by appealing to different functions that art has at different times, and overcomes proceduralism's inability to explain why art matters by appealing to its various functions, Stecker's account does not overcome the circularity of existing procedural accounts. It attempts to define art by appeal to central *art* forms and to functions that *art* has. Stecker claims that this circularity is merely apparent, on the basis that it is possible, in principle, to say what the central art forms and functions of art are for any past or present time, because we do not need a definition of art in order to recognise things as works of art (Stecker 1997: 51). That is, he claims, the right hand side of his definition involves the extension of the concept of art, not its intension. This is also true of Levinson's historical definition. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the charge of circularity. As Stecker himself accepts, an adequate definition of art should give us the extension of "art" (Stecker 1997: 14). We measure the adequacy of any account of the intension of art according to its ability to accommodate our intuitions about its extension. We then adjust our hypotheses about its intension and its extension in order to establish a reflective equilibrium between the two. However, this process of mutual adjustment of hypotheses can proceed only on the assumption that the two hypotheses are independent of one another. Neither Stecker's nor Levinson's accounts of the intension of art can be evaluated in this way because both rely on a prior grasp of the extension of "art".

David Davies argues that the circularity of existing institutional accounts of art can be avoided by providing an account of the function that art institutions perform, such that the resultant account appeals, not to *art* institutions, but to institutions that perform a certain function (D. Davies 2004). Because an institution can perform a function without

every one of the individual works to which it gives rise performing that function, this approach also has the potential to explain the value of art by elucidating the function that art institutions perform, without adopting the implausible view that there is any single function that all artworks (or all good artworks) perform.

On David Davies's account, artworks are the products of institutional processes, not because they are the result of declarative acts of art status conferral, but because artworks are made by manipulating an artistic medium, which is institutional in the broad sense that it consists in a system of shared understandings embodied in the practices of a community of receivers (D. Davies 2004: 245). In elaborating what is artistic about this medium, he draws on Nelson Goodman's claim that all artworks function as symbols of a kind characterised by syntactic density, semantic density, relative repleteness, exemplification, and multiple and complex reference (Goodman 1976: 67-8). Davies denies that all artworks function as symbols of this kind and thus that Goodman's account is correct as it stands (D. Davies 2004: 250), but claims instead that a medium counts as artistic in virtue of facilitating the production of such symbols (D. Davies 2004: 253). That is, an artistic medium consists in a set of shared understandings concerning the symbolic significance attributable to certain features, such that members of the relevant community of receivers can draw on those understandings to produce symbols of the kind characterised by Goodman. The resultant descriptive account avoids the functionalist claim that all artworks function as symbols of this kind by allowing that not every work produced in a medium that facilitates the production of such symbols need be such a symbol (D. Davies 2004: 251).

While this account does not require all artworks to function as symbols of the kind Goodman identifies, it does require them to function as symbols of some kind or another. However, there are some artworks that appear to lack symbolic content altogether. This problem is compounded by the fact that Davies grounds the symbolic functioning of artworks in the shared understandings of a community of receivers. An adequate response to the problem must not only show that all artworks have symbolic content, but also that their contents are accessible to the community of receivers on whose shared understandings they rely.

Moreover, as David Davies acknowledges, this account does not sharply distinguish artworks from all other things (D. Davies 2004: 253). There are various different systems of shared understandings that facilitate the production of symbols, and the symbols produced by manipulating any such system will possess the features Goodman identifies to varying degrees. It is not clear to what degree they must do so in order for the system at issue to count as an artistic medium. Davies claims that such vagueness is desirable given our uncertainty regarding whether or not such practices as carpet weaving and pottery count as artistic (D. Davies 2004: 253). However, while "art" is undoubtedly a vague term, it is not clear that Davies correctly locates this vagueness. Insofar as woven carpets and pottery function as symbols, they rarely possess any of the features Goodman identifies. Moreover, the account construes a variety of other, clearly non-artistic practices as falling within the vague extension of the term "art". For example, as Goodman makes clear, all pictorial symbols are both syntactically and semantically

dense, and relatively replete (Goodman 1976). They also often exemplify the properties they represent, as with coloured pictures that represent colours by instantiating them. Nevertheless, it is implausible that every product of a pictorial system is an artwork. An adequate account of art should reflect this fact, by distinguishing artworks from mere coloured pictures.

Berys Gaut claims that it is impossible to provide individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a work of art (Gaut 2000). Art, he claims, is a “cluster concept”, admitting of various different sufficiency conditions, but no non-disjunctive necessary conditions. He claims that possession of each of the following ten properties counts towards something’s being an artwork: having positive aesthetic properties, such as beauty, grace or elegance; expressing emotion; being intellectually challenging; having formal complexity or coherence; being able to convey complex meanings; exhibiting an individual point of view; being original; being the product of a high degree of skill; belonging to an established artistic form; and being the product of an intention to make an artwork (Gaut 2000: 28).

Because many of these are the properties of performing certain functions, Gaut’s approach promises to help elucidate the value of art, while avoiding the claim that there is any single function in which its value resides. However, the final two properties make reference to art, thus rendering Gaut’s account circular. Moreover, it is not obvious that it will be possible to identify all the different sufficiency conditions for being an artwork by appeal solely to the properties Gaut identifies. Arguably, there are further properties to which some such conditions will have to appeal. Even if it were possible to elucidate a disjunctive necessary condition for being an artwork by appeal solely to the properties Gaut describes, it is not obvious possession of which particular subsets of the properties just listed suffices for something’s being an artwork. A work of philosophy, for example, can be elegant, convey complex meanings, be intellectually challenging, be original and be the product of a high degree of skill. Because he does not provide a comprehensive list of the different sufficiency conditions for art status, Gaut cannot tell us whether or not such a work of philosophy is a work of art. Nevertheless, if he is right about the nature of the concept, the way to answer this question is by providing such a list, rather than by identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for being an artwork.

I agree with Gaut that art is characterised by a variety of different functions, none of which is individually necessary for art status, but think that it is nonetheless possible to identify individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being an artwork. In what follows, I will propose an institutional account which provides such conditions. Like David Davies, I will try to avoid the circularity of existing institutional accounts by identifying a feature distinctive of art institutions, which can be specified independently of the notion of art. To see the form that an adequate institutional definition of art must take, it is crucial to begin by briefly examining the nature of institutions and institutional facts.

4 Institutions and Institutional Facts

According to John Searle, any fact involving the collective intentionality of two or more agents is a *social fact* (Searle 1995). Collective intentional states are intentional states – including intentions, beliefs and desires – that two or more people share. For example, the members of an orchestra may collectively desire to play a piece of music.

Institutional facts are a subclass of social facts that meet two further conditions. Firstly, they result from the collective assignment of function to an object that does not have that function intrinsically, but has an observer-relative function as a result of that function's being assigned. For example, nothing has the function of being an ironing board intrinsically. Rather, things are ironing boards because we collectively assign that function to them. Secondly, the functions assigned are *status* functions: functions that the objects to which they are assigned cannot perform simply in virtue of their physical structure. Whereas something can perform the function of being an ironing board because it has a certain physical structure, things can perform status functions only because a community collectively accepts that they have the requisite status. For example, pieces of paper with a certain pattern on them function as money, not because of their physical structure, but only because a community collectively accepts that those pieces of paper have the status of money.

Status functions typically have the form *X counts as Y in context C*, where the X term identifies certain features of an object, person or state of affairs, and the Y term assigns a special status to those features. For example, putting a ball through a hoop during a game of basketball counts as scoring a goal in certain contexts. Searle argues that money, private property, and political leadership all involve the assignment of status functions – in all these cases, things acquire a function which can be performed only because the corresponding function is collectively accepted.

When the practice of assigning a certain status function becomes regularised, Searle argues, the practice of counting X as Y in C becomes a rule of the form *X counts as Y in C*. These are called *constitutive rules*. These rules are constitutive of institutions: an institution, on Searle's account, is simply a system of such rules. These systems may have an iterative structure: the Y term in one status function can serve as the X term in another, the Y term of which can serve as the X term in yet another status function, and so on.

Constitutive rules contrast with *regulative rules*, which regulate activities whose existence is independent of the rules in question. Whereas the rule in a fast food restaurant requiring diners to dispose of their own rubbish regulates the antecedently existing activity of dining, the rule according to which placing one's chess pieces in a certain relation to one's opponent's king counts as checkmate does not regulate an antecedently existing activity of chess playing, but is instead partly constitutive of playing chess. Without the system of constitutive rules of which this rule is a part, there would be no such thing as chess.

This account construes the essential role of human institutions as being to create deontic powers. Institutions create rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions, and empowerments. These powers can be directly assigned, as when an agent is given a

certain authority, or they can be indirectly assigned, as when something is deemed a five dollar bill, such that those who possess it are thereby empowered to use it to buy things (Searle 1995: 98). Institutions therefore create desire-independent reasons for action. When we recognise something as a duty or obligation, we recognise a reason for doing that thing that is independent of our current inclinations.

5 The Function of Art Institutions

Searle's account of institutions shows that their very existence depends on their being seen to perform some function. In order for people collectively to assign a set of status functions with sufficient regularity for a system of constitutive rules to emerge, with its concomitant deontic powers, they must see that system of rules as performing some function they value. If they did not do so, they would not accept the rules at issue or recognise them as imposing duties and obligations. People may be prepared to accept individual rules that they do not see as performing any valuable function, and may recognise them as creating desire-independent reasons for action, so long as those rules belong to a system that they perceive, as a whole, as serving some valuable function. However, a system of constitutive rules will not emerge unless it is perceived as performing such a function.

The different participants in an institution may perceive it as performing different functions. For example, some people see the law as method of social control, while others perceive it as promoting distributive justice. An institution may emerge even though its various participants attribute quite different functions to it, so long as they all attribute the functions at issue to the same system of constitutive rules. What's essential is not that an institution have ever *actually* performed a humanly valuable function, but that its participants *believed* it to do so. An institution that never actually performs any valuable function may nonetheless come into existence so long as its participants believe it to perform such a function or functions.

Once an institution has come into existence, it may persist even when it ceases to be perceived by its participants to perform any valuable function. It may do so, for example, if is artificially propped up by physical threat. A non-coercive institution may also persist in such circumstances if the duties and obligations it imposes are not too onerous and its participants are apathetic. Nonetheless, institutions that cease to be perceived to perform the functions to which their existence is due will often cease to exist, because in such a case its participants will no longer have any reason to accept the duties and obligations it imposes. There is thus a general connection between an institution's existence and its perceived performance of certain functions: it would not have come into existence in the first place unless its participants had seen it as performing some valuable function or functions, and its continued existence is often due to its continuing to be perceived to perform those functions.

The perceived functions to which an institution's existence is due determine the type of institution it is. An institution is a sporting institution iff its existence is due to its participants' belief that it promotes competition in the exercise of a physical skill. Sporting institutions may persist long after they cease to be perceived to perform such a

function (consider the institution of wrestling). However, if wrestling had never been perceived to perform this function, it would not be a sporting institution. This suggests that the feature distinctive of all art institutions at all times is the perceived functions to which their existence is due.

David Davies's approach to defining art is right insofar as he seeks to avoid the circularity of existing institutional accounts by identifying the function of art institutions. However, he is wrong both to suppose that the actual, rather than the perceived functions of an institution are what determine its type and that there is a single such function art institutions perform. The existence of an art institution may be due to its being perceived to perform a variety of different functions.

This suggests the strategy of providing a non-circular institutional definition of art by analysing art institutions as institutions whose existence is due to their being believed by their participants to perform various functions. Following Gaut's specification of the functions performance of which counts towards something's being an artwork, this strategy yields the following definition:

An institution is an art institution iff its existence is due to its being perceived to perform certain functions, and these functions form a significant subset of the following: promoting positive aesthetic properties; promoting the expression of emotion; facilitating the posing of intellectual challenges; promoting formal complexity and coherence; facilitating the communication of complex meanings; promoting the exhibition of individual points of view; promoting originality; and promoting the exercise of a high degree of skill.

Whereas Gaut must specify the various specific subsets of properties possession of which suffices to make something an artwork if he is to distinguish artworks from works of philosophy and other things that possess a subset of the properties he identifies, I do not need to do so. Let us call those things – such as artworks – that result from the collective assignment of status functions according to the constitutive rules of some institution *products* of that institution. Construing artworks as the products of art institutions, as defined above, suffices to distinguish artworks from works of philosophy. Firstly, unlike artworks, works of philosophy are not the products of an institution, because they do not result from the collective assignment of status functions. Secondly, the existence of the institution of philosophy is not due to its participants' belief that it performs a significant subset of the functions identified above. Rather, it owes its existence to its participants' belief that it performs such functions as helping to answer fundamental questions about the nature of reality and our place in it.

This is not to deny that, on the above definition, it is vague whether or not certain institutions are art institutions. However, unlike David Davies's account of what it is to be an art institution, the definition above correctly locates the vagueness of the term "art". It is unclear whether or not the institutions of carpet weaving and pottery are art institutions because, while their existence is due to their participants perceiving them to promote positive aesthetic properties, formal complexity and coherence, and the exercise

of a high degree of skill, it is not clear whether this set of functions is a sufficiently significant subset of the functions identified above for them to qualify as art institutions.

6 A New Institutional Definition of Art

On the approach I am advocating, the notion of an artwork is essentially institutional, because facts concerning which things are artworks are institutional facts. However, one cannot define artworks simply as the products of institutions whose existence is due to their participants' belief that they perform the functions identified above. Such a definition would distinguish artworks from exhibition catalogues and instruction manuals for artists, since such things are not the products of art institutions in the relevant sense. They do not result from the collective assignment of status functions according to the constitutive rules of art institutions. Whether or not something is an exhibition catalogue or an instruction manual depends on its semantic features, rather than on the collective intentional states of participants in art institutions. Nevertheless, such institutions have a variety of products other than artworks. For example, artists and art critics may both figure as Y terms in the constitutive rules of art institutions. To provide a reductive definition of art, rather than of any of these other institutional notions, we need a means of distinguishing institutional facts about artworks from the other institutional facts to which art institutions give rise, without appeal to the notion of art.

The variety of different functions that art institutions are perceived to perform suggests that they incorporate a range of different constitutive rules, each with the form *X counts as an artwork in C*, with different X and C terms. There is a plurality of different sufficient conditions for being an artwork, grounded in this plurality of constitutive rules. Just as football incorporates a variety of different constitutive rules assigning the status function of scoring a point to players' performance of different tasks, so too there are different constitutive rules of art institutions that assign the status function of being an artwork to things with different properties. While the existence of one rule may be due to its assigning the status function of being an artwork to things that are perceived to have one function, another may assign that status to things that are perceived to have some other function.

Institutional facts about artworks directly affect how well art institutions perform the functions in terms of which they are characterised. Depending on the kinds of things that count as artworks according to its constitutive rules, an art institution will do a better or worse job of performing those functions. Artworks that perform one or more of the functions at issue have a positive effect on how well the art institution of which they are products performs these functions, whereas artworks that do not do so have a negative effect on how well it performs them. Moreover, the effects that institutional facts about artworks have on how well art institutions perform these functions are direct: they do not depend on further institutional facts. On the assumption that, according to the constitutive rules of at least some art institutions, artists are people who make artworks, what counts as an artwork affects who counts as an artist according to the constitutive rules of those art institutions. What counts as an artwork may therefore affect the further institutional facts to which the institutions of which they are products give rise. Nevertheless, simply in virtue of either performing or of failing to perform the functions in terms of which art

institutions are characterised, all artworks affect how well the institutions of which they are products perform those functions, whether or not they affect the further institutional facts to which those institutions give rise.

By contrast, institutional facts about artists and art critics do not directly affect the ability of art institutions to perform these functions. Who counts as an artist and who counts as a critic according to the constitutive rules of an art institution has no direct bearing on how well that institution performs the functions that make it an art institution. Institutional facts about artists and critics affect its ability to perform those functions only indirectly, by affecting the further institutional facts to which it gives rise. More specifically, they do so by affecting what counts as an artwork according to the constitutive rules of that institution. Who counts as a critic may influence what counts as an artwork either in virtue of the existing constitutive rules of an art institution (if, for example, those rules hold that artworks are things that art critics deem worthy of appreciation), or because critics influence the nature of those of its constitutive rules that determine what counts as an artwork. This happens when, for example, the opinions critics express regarding which artworks are good and which of their features account for their being good influence subsequent practices within that institution, such that its participants come regularly to count works with these features as artworks, leading to the emergence of a new constitutive rule providing sufficient conditions for being an artwork. In either case, who counts as an art critic according to the constitutive rules of that institution affects the institution's ability to perform the functions characteristic of art institutions only indirectly, by influencing what counts as an artwork according to its constitutive rules.

I propose the following institutional definition of art:

Something is an artwork if and only if it is the product of an art institution, and it directly affects how effectively that institution performs the perceived functions to which its existence is due.

This is a reductive definition of art. Its reference to an art institution can be removed simply by replacing “art institution” with the definition provided earlier.

This definition accommodates both readymade artworks and artworks comprising objects that are deliberately manufactured so as to fall within the scope of the constitutive rules of an art institution. To say that something is the product of an art institution is not to say anything about how it came to have its physical composition or structure. Duchamp's artwork *Fountain* is the product of an art institution, despite comprising a readymade urinal that was manufactured by people who were not acting as participants in an art institution because, according to the constitutive rules of that institution, the urinal in question counts as an artwork.

It also accommodates the existence of artworks that do not perform any of the functions in terms of which I characterised art institutions. Artworks that do not perform any of these functions have a direct adverse effect on how well the institution of which they are products performs those functions.

Institutional theories of art are often criticised for failing to accommodate as artworks artefacts produced by isolated individuals operating independently of any institutional context. Like other institutional theories, the present account denies that such works are artworks. Just how counterintuitive is this? Note that we are not tempted to take just any artefacts produced by an isolated individual to be artworks. The most plausible candidates for extra-institutional artworks perform a significant subset of the functions in terms of which I defined art institutions. However, as I noted when discussing Gaut's position, it is very difficult to specify just which of these functions something must perform in order to be an artwork, as the example of the work of philosophy demonstrates. The present account explains this difficulty: something's performing some subset of the functions identified by Gaut never suffices to make it art. It must also be embedded in an appropriate institutional context.

This strikes some as counterintuitive because they assume that the institutional conditions required for it to acquire art status are unduly onerous. Previous institutional accounts have implied that, for proto-art to yield art proper, a formalised institutional structure with explicitly encoded rules and authority roles must be established. However, Searle's account of institutions shows that institutions do not require explicitly encoded rules, but merely regularities in the collective assignment of status functions. Although an isolated individual who produces artefacts that perform a subset of the functions Gaut identifies does not produce art, because she does not engage in an institutional practice, if others became aware of her activity, came collectively to assign status functions to the artefacts she produced and to do so with sufficient regularity for constitutive rules to emerge, and did so because they saw them as performing the functions at issue, the artefacts she produced would count as artworks.

7 Artistic Value

Artworks are good as artworks – they have *artistic value* – insofar as they have the tendency to improve how well the institutions of which they are products perform the functions that make them art institutions. The greater the improvement they have the tendency to make to these institutions' performance of those functions, the greater their artistic value. While the constitutive rules of art institutions are determined by their participants' *beliefs* about the nature of the functions at issue, a work's artistic value is determined by its *actual* tendency to improve how effectively the institution of which it is a product performs the functions at issue. A work's artistic value therefore depends on what it actually is for something to perform the functions at issue, rather than on widespread beliefs about what it is for it to do so.

An artwork's tendency to improve how effectively an institution performs these functions is determined by both its direct and its indirect effects on the institution's performance of them. All artworks have a direct positive or negative influence on how effectively the institutions of which they are products perform those functions. However, they may also have a range of either actual or potential indirect effects on its ability to perform them. Institutional facts about which things are artworks may indirectly influence how effectively an institution performs these functions by influencing what other things count

as artworks according to its constitutive rules. For example, an artwork may indirectly improve how effectively the institution of which it is a product promotes positive aesthetic properties because it introduces novel techniques for producing artefacts with positive aesthetic properties that are subsequently widely adopted within that institution, leading to the emergence of constitutive rules which accord art status to works produced by those techniques.

Whether or not a given artwork actually has an indirect positive influence on an institution's effectiveness in performing the functions characteristic of art institutions depends on contingent facts about how that artwork influences the institution's subsequent development. However, its *tendency* to influence how effectively that institution performs those functions – and thus its artistic value – is independent of such contingencies. The history of a work's effect on the institution that produced it may illuminate its artistic value by providing evidence of its tendency to influence that institution's performance of those functions, but its artistic value is independent of that history, which may be determined by a range of things other than the work's tendency to influence the institution's ability to perform those functions.

This account of what it is for an artwork to be good as an artwork does not construe only works that perform the functions characteristic of art institutions as artistically valuable. An artwork may indirectly improve how effectively the institution of which it is a product performs these functions without itself performing any of them. For example, a work that introduces novel techniques that can be used to produce artefacts with positive aesthetic properties need not itself have such properties, or indeed perform any of the other functions characteristic of art institutions. Nevertheless, because it has the tendency positively to influence how effectively the institution of which it is a product performs the function of promoting positive aesthetic properties, the work has artistic value.

Neither all artworks nor all good artworks need possess any of the properties Gaut identifies. The only property that unites all good artworks is that of having the tendency to enhance an institution's performance of the functions in terms of which I have characterised art institutions.

Avant garde works may have a range of indirect positive influences on how effectively the institutions of which they are products perform these functions. For example, they may help to clarify the nature of the functions at issue. The nature of the constitutive rules of an art institution depends on its participants' beliefs about the nature of those functions, and these beliefs may be incorrect. Avant garde works may have artistic value although they do not perform any of the functions at issue because they shed light on the nature of those functions, and thereby indirectly improve the effectiveness with which art institutions perform them. Likewise, self-reflexive works about the nature of art itself may help to illuminate the nature of art institutions and clarify the means by which they can perform their characteristic functions. In so doing, they may indirectly improve the effectiveness with which the institutions that produced them perform the functions at issue, even though they do not themselves perform any of these functions.

Every artwork that performs one or more of the functions characteristic of art institutions improves the effectiveness with which the institution that produced it performs those functions. Consequently, every such artwork has some degree of artistic value. Nevertheless, this degree may be negligible. For example, an artwork with positive aesthetic properties produced using hackneyed techniques will have little tendency indirectly to influence how effectively the institution of which it is a product performs the functions characteristic of art institutions and will therefore have very limited artistic value. By contrast, an artwork which lacks positive aesthetic properties but introduces a new technique that can be used to produce artefacts with positive aesthetic properties and could give rise to new constitutive rules assigning art status to works with positive aesthetic properties produced using those techniques may have much greater artistic value. A work's artistic value is not a straightforward measure of its possession of the properties Gaut identifies, but rather a measure of its ability to improve the institutionalised pursuit of such properties.

Conclusion

The problem of defining art has seemed intractable because it has consistently been approached in the wrong way. Searle's account of institutions shows that their existence depends on the internal points of view of their participants. Institutions depend on collective intentionality and the assignment of status functions, and such facts are ontologically subjective: their existence depends on the first person points of view of those who collectively assign the status functions at issue (Searle 1995: 98). From the external point of view of someone who does not accept the desire-independent reasons for action provided by the deontic structure of an institution, such as that of an anthropologist examining the institutions of an alien culture, the existence of the institution can be discerned only by identifying the collective intentional states of its participants. Only if we recognise the collective intentional states of participants in art institutions can we determine either what it is for something to be art, or what it is for it to be good art.

Previous functionalist accounts have assumed that the function that good artworks perform must be identifiable from an external point of view, independently of the intentional states of participants in art institutions. They have thus failed to identify any function shared by all examples of good art. By acknowledging the dependence of art institutions on the collective intentional states of their participants and the dependence of those states on the perceived function of art institutions, I have identified a function that all good artworks have in common: that of tending to ameliorate the institutionalised pursuit of the functions to the perceived performance of which art institutions owe their existence.

Previous institutional accounts have failed to acknowledge that art institutions come into existence because their participants believe them to perform valuable functions. This has prevented them both from providing a reductive analysis of art, and from explaining the value of art. The definition that I have proposed overcomes the circularity of previous institutional accounts of art by appealing to the functions performed by art institutions

Moreover, it explains the value of good art by appeal to its capacity to improve art institutions' performance of these functions.

Why should one accept the duties and obligations imposed by art institutions, when one could instead pursue these functions independently of any institution? The answer resides in the enormous social power that institutions can achieve. An individual who pursues such functions in an extra-institutional context can at best make a small contribution to their prominence. By contrast, one who participates in an institution that performs them can influence both whether or not and how whole societies are educated about these functions; can induce governments to fund programmes dedicated to their performance; and can influence what vast groups of people in different geographical and temporal contexts believe about their nature and importance. Although they may perform the functions in terms of which they are characterised imperfectly, art institutions can nonetheless perform them more effectively than individuals can do.

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