A COUNTER-EXAMPLE TO THEATRICAL
TYPE THEORIES

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Plays, symphonies and other works in the performing arts are generally regarded, ontologically speaking, as being *types*, with individual performances of those works being regarded as tokens of those types.[1]

But in this brief paper I shall show that there is a logical feature of type theory which makes it impossible for such a theory to satisfactorily explain a *'double performance'* case that I shall present: one in which a single play performance is actually a performance of two *different* plays.[2]

As a preliminary point about the related performing art of music, it is generally recognized that musical compositions cannot be individuated only by their scores, for it is possible that two different composers might produce *textually identical musical scores*. These identical scores nevertheless would provide the textual basis for two *distinct* pieces of music, because of the fact that there are two different composers involved, and because of their differing artistic intentions concerning their respective musical works.[3]

A similar point applies to the texts of literary works as well, as Borges showed with his well-known example of a fictitious work by one 'Pierre Menard', the text of which was word-for-word identical with the text of a section of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, but whose aesthetic qualities were quite different, hence ensuring its identity as a literary artwork distinct from the relevant part of *Don Quixote* itself.[4]

With these generally acknowledged antecedents in mind, I shall assume that a similar point holds for plays also – that is, that there could be two distinct *plays*, written by different authors with different intentions, which nevertheless had identical texts.

Now I shall begin to construct the case, which draws initially on an interesting musical example provided by Jerrold Levinson, which involves two distinct but identically scored musical waltzes by composers Y and Z:

> "...[S]uppose I intend to play a famous waltz by Y I have not heard and have never seen the score of. Someone devilishly gives me a score of the Dadaistic composer Z's recent waltz, which strangely enough has the same S/PM [sound-performance means] structure as Y's waltz. [Which therefore has the same score as Y's waltz.] I think that the sound event I produce is a performance of Y's waltz, not of Z's waltz. ... This suggests that at least in some cases it is what you think you are producing or performing, not what copies or scores you are actually using, that determines what work the result belongs to..."[5]

I am inclined to agree with Levinson about this specific case – though not with the type-theoretic framework within which he embeds it – but things become more equivocal if the situation is translated into a theatrical context, and then expanded as follows. First, suppose that famous playwright A has written a play AT, which the Janus theater company is preparing to stage. A sends them his script T1, but it is intercepted by a scheming rival playwright B, who has written another play BT which, strangely enough, has a script T2 that is word for word identical with the script T1 of A's play. B is determined to get his play staged by the Janus company, and so he sends his script T2 to Janus in place of A's script T1, without informing them of the substitution.

Now so far there is no relevant difference from Levinson's example: presumably if the Janus company mounts a performance that uses B's script T2 for his play BT, they will nevertheless still be performing A's play AT rather than B's play BT, since their *intention* is to perform A's play AT.

But second, suppose that B realizes the ineffectiveness of simply sending his own script T2, and devilishly decides to improve his chances by actually *taking part* in the Janus rehearsals himself—not, I hasten to add, *as* himself, but instead *disguised as* famous playwright A!

Third, suppose that B's deception is successful, and that the Janus company happily accepts B's suggestions as to matters of staging, interpretation and so on with respect to their developing production, in the belief that they are taking direction from A himself concerning A's play AT.

Now I claim that, if one imagines an ordered range of cases with varying amounts of influence by B on the developing production, from very slight to very great influence, then intuitively it will be hard to deny that the cases must fall into *one of three, non-empty ordered categories*,[6] as follows. First, if the influence by B is only *very slight*, then it is as if B were not present at all, and so the company is still performing A's play AT. Thus there is a 'slight' *category 1*, a range of cases in which B's presence essentially makes no difference.

Jumping now to the other extreme, if B's influence on the Janus company is *very great*, or even *overwhelming*, to the extent that their whole conception of the play they are trying to perform is molded and directed by B, then it seems hard to deny that under these conditions it is *B's play BT* that they are performing, rather than A's play AT. These are *category 3* cases of *conclusive* or *definitive* influence by B, a range of cases in which B's presence makes *all* the difference as to which play is being performed by the company.[7]

However, the main point of this whole example is that there will inevitably also be an *intermediate* range of cases, defining a *category 2*, in which B has *some* influence, or moderate influence, on the company's production – so that his influence is not merely 'slight' as in category 1 – but not *so* significant an influence as to make B's influence 'conclusive' as in category 3.

Now my question is: which play, or plays, is being performed when category 2 kinds of moderate influence by B obtain?

Let us review the options. First, as any audience-goers at a performance of the relevant production could attest, there definitely is *some* play or other that the Janus company is performing, because the audience members are actually watching and experiencing a performance of some play. So, the issue cannot be dodged by claiming that *no* play is being performed.

Second, though there is a continuous range of influence-cases, there is no continuous range of *plays* to be considered, no 'intermediate' play in between A's play AT and B's play BT. Indeed, it is unclear what that could even mean, since such an 'intermediate' play would be unintended and authorless. Hence whatever play or plays is being performed must be selected from the group of AT and BT: there are no other possible candidates.

Third, neither AT by itself, nor BT by itself, is a valid choice as to which play or plays is being performed. For either choice would amount to a denial that there *are* any intermediate, category 2 cases, which are essentially cases in which an *equally or equivalently good* case can be made for each play that it is being performed by the company.

Finally, then, the only remaining possibility is that the company is, under those conditions of prior moderate influence by B, performing *both plays simultaneously.* For a condition of *moderate* influence is one in which it is the case, both that the influence of B is not so strong as to positively *prevent* A's play AT being performed – as with category 3 cases – yet also one in which it is the case that the company is *enough* influenced by B so that they are *also* performing B's play BT (unlike category 1 cases).

Note that the argument here does not depend on any substantive assessment of the strength of any *particular* arguments for or against a particular play being performed under various conditions, because such arguments would merely show a need to shift or reset the boundaries of categories 1, 2 and 3 appropriately. Thus for instance, an argument to the effect that, under certain specified conditions of uncertainty, there should be a default presumption that it is *solely A's play AT* that is performed would merely show a need to shift the boundaries of category 2 so that it starts *above* that area of uncertainty.

Nor could such particular arguments show that category 2 is *empty*, because, for instance, any arguments about the presumptive strength of play AT's claim to be performed, to the extent that they are successful, would *ipso facto* have some legitimate weight even in cases when the evidence is *also* strong (because of the strength of playwright B's influence) that play BT is performed as well.

I conclude that the above case shows that it is *epistemically possible* that there are conditions under which the Janus company could *justifiably be claimed* to be performing both play AT and play BT simultaneously.

Now I take it that it would be agreed that a condition of adequacy on any *logical* or *ontological* theory of the nature of plays and performances is that it should not foreclose on, or judge as logically or ontologically *impossible*, any situation that is genuinely *epistemically possible* in the manner just described.

But it is easy to show that any *type theory* cannot allow the ontological possibility of a single performance simultaneously being a performance of two distinct plays. For since plays are types, according to a type theory, then *distinct plays* must be *distinct types*. But for types of the same general kind (such as the assumption by a type theory that there could be two types which were both *plays*), distinctness must be defined as *disjointness* of the sets of their tokens. Example: for two biological species to be *distinct types* of species, such as pigs and cows, it must be the case that there is no animal that is both a pig and a cow, i.e., the set of pigs and the set of cows must be disjoint.[8]

Hence on the 'type' view, according to which a performance is a *token* of a play *type*, a single performance could not simultaneously be a token of two *distinct* play-types.

I conclude that any type theory of plays must fail to meet the above adequacy condition on non-foreclosure of genuine epistemic possibilities, and so any such theory must be rejected. Also, as a final note, perhaps it is clear enough that an equivalent musical example could easily be constructed, so that type theories must fail for musical works as well.

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NOTES

[1] Support for a 'type' view as applied to the performing arts is provided by (among others) Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1998), Gregory Currie, *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1980), and Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays* 2d ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[2] I provide some other arguments against a type view of plays in my article "Theater, Representation, Types and Interpretation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 39 no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 197-209.

[3] E.g., see Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), Chs. 4 and 5.

[4] Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote,*' in J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin, 1985).

[5] Ibid., pp. 99-100.

[6] A more scrupulous account would have five categories, the extra two being unclear or borderline cases between categories 1 and 2, and categories 2 and 3; but that refinement would make no difference to my argument.

[7] This case could still be made to fit Levinson's (appropriately translated) view that the intentions of the company determine which play is being performed. For, among other things, they intend to perform *the play authored by the man who is giving them directions and suggestions*, which man happens to be B himself rather than A—so that even on intentional grounds, there is a clear sense in which they intend to perform (what is in fact) B's play, even though they also have some false beliefs about B.

[8] See also my discussion of these logical issues in my article, "Artworks Versus Designs," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 41, no. 2 (April 2001), pp. 162-177, where I show (among other things) that two distinct sculptures could be associated with the same artifact, so that on a type view of sculptures, such as that of Currie, ibid., a single artifact would have to be (*per impossibile*) a token of two distinct types of the same general kind.