

THE PROPOSITIONAL CHALLENGE TO AESTHETICS

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It is generally accepted that Picasso might have used a different canvas as the vehicle for his painting 'Guernica', and also that the artwork 'Guernica' itself necessarily represents a certain historical episode--rather than, say, a bowl of fruit. I argue that such a conjunctive acceptance entails a broadly propositional view of the nature of representational artworks. In addition, I argue--via a comprehensive examination of possible alternatives--that, perhaps surprisingly, there simply is no other available conjunctive view of the nature of representational artworks in general.

Propositions truly or falsely represent worldly states, and they are expressed by tokens of linguistic sentences. Could there be some analogous way in which broadly representational artworks are expressed by token artistic vehicles, such as particular canvasses or performances? If so, such artworks might be like propositions, and the structure of artistic meaning might be analogous to that of linguistically expressed propositional meaning.

However, philosophers of art, and aesthetic theories generally, have at best offered only lukewarm or sporadic support for such ideas. A few have held that some artworks make statements or express thoughts,¹ even though an implication of the claim--that art might be relevant to morality in various ways--has attracted some broader support.² But views emphasizing distinctions of artistic from linguistic forms of expression are much more

common³--even among those, such as Danto, Scruton and Wollheim, who also subscribe to a statement-expressing view for some artworks.

In particular, there has been virtually no support for what I shall argue to be a *primary* logical feature of genuine propositional explanations--namely, a *vehicle contingency* claim to the effect that propositions are only contingently expressed by particular concrete vehicles. However, by showing some fundamental flaws in non-propositional accounts I shall argue that a broadly propositional model of artistic communication is not only *viable*, but it is also *unavoidable*. As a consequence, almost all theories having implications for art ontology and semantics in the representational arts, including general theories of depiction, will need to be comprehensively re-evaluated. Hence in effect I shall be arguing that a largely unnoticed crisis has been brewing in the philosophy of art, and aesthetics generally, ever since the dawn of modern propositional semantics.

To avoid any misunderstanding, a preliminary distinction must be made between *broadly logical* propositional models or accounts (as specified at the end of section 1), and various proposals about the specific kinds of content involved in artistic meaning, and the kinds of knowledge derivable thereby. Some such *content-specific* assumptions may help to explain why the merits of a broader propositional theory, and its implications for more standard aesthetic conceptions, have remained generally unappreciated.

As a case in point, presumably if artworks are to be morally assessed, at least some aspects of their meaning must be translatable into linguistically expressible propositions,

which can then be compared with the deliverances of some moral theory. But translatability into a linguistically expressible form is a *content-specific* requirement--a *narrow translatability* thesis--that is irrelevant to the discussion here. Consequently, broadly propositional theories of art cannot be refuted simply by showing, for instance, the absurdity of attempts to translate the work of artists such as Duchamp or Monet into explicitly linguistic propositional forms.⁴ For paintings or photographs might still be capable of conveying intricate thoughts in their own characteristic, medium-specific ways.⁵ Also, even if those theories that emphasize distinctions of artistic from linguistic forms of expression, as mentioned above, are largely correct in their views, only as conjoined with a narrow translatability thesis would it follow that artworks in general must be non-propositional.

To be more explicit, a narrow linguistic translation thesis is irrelevant because it is a thesis about the *specific kinds of meaningful content* that could be expressed by artworks. In a strong form, it would claim that kinds of artistic content are necessarily confined to those kinds that could also be expressed by linguistic vehicles. By contrast, the propositional model to be discussed is not about particular kinds of content at all, but instead it is, I shall argue, primarily about *some modal constraints on possible relations of token artistic vehicles to the semantic structure of artwork contents, whatever those contents might be.*

As another consequence of this broadly logical rather than content-based propositional approach, an issue that looms large in traditional theories of depiction--namely that of

whether there are necessary, perhaps resemblance-based restrictions on possible *types* of vehicles that can depict a particular *kind* of subject--will also be ignored here. Hence the popular contrast between the purely conventional nature of the relation between linguistic sentence types and propositions, versus supposedly non-conventional relations between picture types and their representational meanings, will also play no part in the discussion. That distinction too is probably yet another smokescreen--in addition to the content-specific narrow translatability thesis--that has served to obscure fundamental issues about the relations of propositional and artistic kinds of meaning.

An important feature of much of the discussion below is that it will focus on *modal* issues concerning propositions, vehicles and artworks--concerning the *necessity* or *contingency* of their relations to each other, and to what the relevant propositions or artworks represent. Also, the modal focus will be of a specifically *conjunctive* kind: for instance, could we *both* hold that an artwork is necessarily related to its vehicle, *and* hold that it necessarily represents something? This unusual conjunctive modal focus will enable both similarities and distinctions to become visible which otherwise would continue to remain unnoticed. It may also be hoped to help update and re-energize some significant connections between aesthetics, the philosophy of language, cognitive science and metaphysics that in some cases have languished for many decades.

I. LINGUISTIC VEHICLES AND THE PROPOSITIONAL MODEL

To begin, here is brief summary of relevant aspects of the propositional model of linguistic communication. Gottlob Frege was one of the first philosophers and logicians to clearly distinguish the concept of a *thought* or *proposition*--a mind-independent entity having truth-conditions--both from the psychology of thinkers, and from tokens of the conventional linguistic symbols used to express such thoughts or propositions in communicative acts.⁶

In so doing, Frege ushered in the modern, universally accepted view that tokens of the symbolic linguistic vehicles used to express propositions have a purely contingent or accidental relation to those propositions. A proposition itself is *necessarily* about some particular state of affairs, and it necessarily specifies truth-conditions for the claim that it makes. But by contrast, any linguistic sentence token that expresses a proposition expresses it only *contingently*--a given sentence token might have expressed some other proposition, or expressed no proposition at all. Correspondingly, a given proposition is not essentially tied to any one particular vehicle--it is a purely contingent matter as to which vehicles, if any, express the relevant proposition. Thus the standard view of the role of sentences in propositional communication is one of *vehicle non-essentialism*. (Vehicles are always tokens rather than types in this paper). An implication of this non-essentialist view is that sentence tokens themselves, as the vehicles of propositional expression, cannot acquire any necessary properties simply in virtue of expressing a proposition, because that relation is a purely contingent one. It also follows that propositions are both ontologically and semantically independent of their physical vehicles.

Furthermore, this standard view about the nature of propositional communication can be reinforced by a powerful independent metaphysical argument, as follows. Arguably all empirical matters of fact are purely contingent, so that no physical object, event etc. could have any necessary relational properties. Call this the *physical contingency* thesis for the relational properties of physical items. But then, in particular, it follows that those physical objects that serve as propositional vehicles *could not* be necessarily related to the propositions that they express. So, independently of Fregean considerations, and whether or not propositions must have all of their semantic properties necessarily, vehicle non-essentialism must hold for the concrete vehicles that express those propositions because of the physical contingency thesis. So vehicle non-essentialism for propositions is *overdetermined*--it holds both because of propositional theory and because of the physical contingency thesis.

However, there is a dangerously over-simplified way of expressing these truths, such as in the claim "The sentence token 'Napoleon was born in Corsica' contingently represents the fact that Napoleon was born in Corsica." Perhaps in some loose and popular sense this is true, in that any token of the relevant sentence does indeed only have a contingent relation to the relevant fact. But strictly speaking the embedded sentence token itself represents *nothing*, whether contingently or otherwise. Propositional representation is not a direct, one-stage contingent representational process, but instead it is an indirect, two-stage process, involving both *contingent expression* of a given proposition by a vehicle, plus the *necessary representation* by the proposition of the relevant fact as being either

correct or incorrect (or as holding or not holding). Supposing otherwise commits what could be called the *fallacy of contingent representation*. So, to summarize this point, the standard propositional model of linguistic communication denies the possibility of contingent representation by linguistic vehicles, on the ground that it illegitimately compresses into one supposed stage what are in fact two distinct relational stages of contingent expression and necessary representation. (See section 7 for further discussion of this issue).

As for the propositional model of linguistic communication itself, it is of course committed to what could be called *representational essentialism*, in that what is communicated, namely the relevant propositions, are such that they *necessarily* represent particular worldly states of affairs, and *necessarily* provide truth-conditions for their own truth or falsity. Also, clearly there is a close, complementary relation in the propositional model between representational essentialism for propositions and the denial of the possibility of one-stage contingent representation by linguistic vehicles. Propositions and vehicles play *complementary* functional roles in propositional theories, so neither could usurp the functions of the other. The basic thesis of this paper is that--perhaps surprisingly--there is no even minimally plausible alternative model available in aesthetics (or in any other areas of philosophy and the sciences covering communication either, for that matter).

This completes the specification of the standard model for propositions of a kind that can be expressed using linguistic representational vehicles. The model is easily generalizable

to *arbitrary* kinds of vehicles. To emphasize, only *token*--rather than *type*--vehicles such as particular objects, states (such as a conscious state or a brain state), events and so on will be considered, and for simplicity only propositions about actual worldly objects or matters of fact. So a *propositional* model of vehicular content is one involving two relational stages, in the first of which the relevant kind of vehicle contingently expresses a proposition, and in the second of which that proposition necessarily represents some actual particular worldly item, and necessarily characterizes it in some way that is truth or correctness-evaluable.

All of the other features of propositions discussed above follow from this succinct, one-sentence characterization. *Representational essentialism* is just a label for the necessary aboutness and necessary correctness-evaluability of propositions. *Vehicle non-essentialism* holds for propositions because of the contingency of their expression by vehicles (which also is independently supported by the *physical contingency thesis* for vehicles and other objects). And *contingent representation by vehicles* is ruled out as an illegitimate conflation of the two distinct relational stages of the combined relation of propositions to their vehicles. Also, to emphasize, the model is potentially broad enough to cover both public representational vehicles such as canvases and musical performances, and also individual cognitive vehicles such as particular conscious states or neurological states of a person.

II. THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF THE PROPOSITIONAL MODEL FOR REPRESENTATIONAL ARTWORKS

The issue to be addressed is that of whether the propositional model can be avoided in any plausible theory of the ontology and semantics of representational artworks (hereafter simply referred to as 'artworks') such as pictures or performances, insofar as they represent actual worldly objects or events.⁷ My thesis is that the propositional model cannot be avoided. Call this the *propositional indispensability* thesis.

Now it might be thought that, since the propositional indispensability thesis is such a strong one--that no other kind of theory could even be plausible--that discussion of it as applied to the arts would be complex and controversial. However, the propositional model is a very simple one, and there are only two relevant factors--artworks and vehicles. Consider the following parallels. Given the contingency of linguistic expressions of propositions, a token of the *linguistic vehicle* 'the Sears Tower is in Chicago' could have expressed the proposition currently expressed by tokens of the linguistic vehicle 'the Eiffel Tower is in France'. However, given our standard criteria for propositional identity, the *proposition* currently expressed by 'the Sears Tower is in Chicago' necessarily represents a particular actual building as being in Chicago, and hence it could not be identical with the proposition currently expressed by 'the Eiffel

Tower is in France', which instead necessarily represents a distinct building as being in another city.

Next, consider two parallel claims for artworks. The *physical canvas* on which a competent artist X painted a picture of the Sears Tower in Chicago could instead have been used by him to paint a picture of the Eiffel Tower in France--surely true. However, given our standard criteria for artwork identity, X's resulting *artwork* 'The Sears Tower in Chicago' necessarily represents the Sears Tower, and hence it could not be identical with some other artwork that instead represented the Eiffel Tower. Or, to use a more well-known example involving an actual, publicly available artwork, Picasso's *artwork* 'Guernica' could not be a picture of a particular bowl of fruit that was in Picasso's possession, even though of course Picasso could have used the *canvas*, on which he painted 'Guernica', as the vehicle for a picture of that same particular bowl of fruit.

I claim that if the simple parallelism in contingency versus necessity exhibited here is legitimate and unavoidable for artworks in general, *we already have all the evidence we need* to establish the propositional indispensability thesis. This may be demonstrated as follows. *First*, in the parallel cases, vehicle contingency holds for propositions and artworks. This is so because human choices are contingent--both language users and artists could have used their respective vehicles in differing ways than they actually did. Also, more generally, the *physical contingency thesis* for vehicles holds independently of propositional theory, in that it is simply a general metaphysical thesis that all matters of empirical fact are contingent, including the relational properties of physical objects or

events, of which vehicles are a subset. And *second*, the representational reference and correctness factors involved in both the propositional and artwork cases are necessary rather than contingent.

Given the truth of the physical contingency thesis, neither the linguistic propositional vehicles, nor the canvas-based artwork vehicles, can *themselves* have any necessary representational properties. But the relevant propositions and artworks do have necessary representational properties. It follows that the relevant propositions and artworks must be *metaphysically distinct* from the relevant vehicles, and only stand in some contingent relation to them. Now in the propositional model, the contingent relation of 'expression' holding between a vehicle and a proposition was left completely uncharacterized. It is no more than a stand-in for whatever might be the actual contingent relation between a vehicle and a proposition or artwork respectively (perhaps different specific relations in each kind of case). Hence, to conclude, the relations of artworks to their vehicles does precisely conform to the propositional model, so that the propositional indispensability thesis is true.

To sum up, if we accept *both* that a) artworks stand in a contingent relation to their vehicles, *and* b) that artworks as such necessarily represent what they do, *then the propositional indispensability thesis is true for artworks*. It should be emphasized that this propositional indispensability thesis is a *conjunctive* thesis, in which the conjuncts are related. On the propositional view, artworks must be contingently related to their vehicles in part *because* they are necessarily related to what they represent. So counter-

arguments denying one of the individual conjuncts would not be to the point. In order to disprove the indispensability thesis, it would be necessary to show that at least one of the other three logically possible *conjunctive* modal theses--'necessary vehicle/necessary representation', 'necessary vehicle/contingent representation', or 'contingent vehicle/contingent representation'--could provide a plausible basis for the philosophy of art for at least some artworks. These alternatives will be shown to be unworkable in the following sections, hence securing the truth of the propositional indispensability thesis.

III. NECESSARY VEHICLE/NECESSARY REPRESENTATION: VEHICLE-ARTWORK IDENTITY VIEWS

This section will begin a discussion of putative aesthetic theories holding *both* that an artwork bears a necessary relation to its vehicle, *and* that the artwork necessarily represents what it represents in a correctness-evaluable way. This combination is perhaps the most complex of the three conjunctive theses providing potential alternatives to the propositional 'contingent vehicle/necessary representation' model. In part this complexity is because of the first conjunct itself: there potentially are four separate kinds of way in which a vehicle and an artwork could be, or become, necessarily related.

In summary form, these four ways are as follows. First, the artwork could be *identical* with the vehicle. This option is the topic of the current section. Second, the vehicle could *non-identically constitute*, or in some other way be *a necessary part of an*

ontological structure, that is identified with the artwork. Danto's theory, according to which an artwork is a vehicle plus an interpretation, is probably the best-known theory of this type, and it is discussed in the next section IV. Third, the artwork might be a *type*, whose vehicles are necessarily related to it in virtue of their possession of the defining properties for a token to be a token of that type, as discussed in section V. And fourth, for completeness's sake, what could be called *putative necessity of origin* cases should be considered, in which it would be claimed that a vehicle, during and subsequent to the creation of an artwork, *becomes* necessarily related to that artwork, even though it *was* a contingent matter, prior to its creation, whether an artwork was associated with that vehicle. This view will be discussed in section VI.

The rest of this section will consider the first kind of claim in the context of the conjunctive thesis, namely that *an artwork is identical with a vehicle*, which artwork *also necessarily represents* some particular item. Since identity of artwork and vehicle is being postulated, this conjunctive claim entails that a *vehicle*--namely, the vehicle that is identical with the artwork--necessarily represents some particular item. This claim may safely be judged to be extremely implausible for physical vehicles, since it violates the physical contingency thesis (on which see section II). In addition, more specific arguments against the thesis are common in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind. For example, it is generally agreed that public representational vehicles such as canvasses can only have a *derivative* kind of intentionality, or representational aboutness, in that their aboutness is contingent on decisions or conventions of their human users, rather than being intrinsic to the vehicles themselves.⁸ In the philosophy of art, broadly

intentionalist theories that appeal to the contingent intentions of artists and audiences lead to the same conclusion.⁹

As for human cognitive states as vehicles, some care is needed to distinguish the physical states themselves from their cognitive contents. Mainstream cognitive science assumes that many cognitive states are representational states, but on standard views this is so in virtue of the relevant physical states contingently expressing, or having as their contents, appropriate propositions, as a result of the contingent causal relations of the cognitive system with its environment. So these standard views deny that cognitive states *as such* necessarily or intrinsically represent anything.

But for completeness it should be mentioned that one well-known philosopher, namely John Searle, at least *seems* on occasion to disagree with this consensus in cognitive science. He claims that some mental states have a kind of *intrinsic* intentionality or necessary aboutness, and that it is unnecessary to postulate some mind-independent entity such as a proposition to explain such cases.¹⁰ If Searle were correct, and the Croce-Collingwood theory of artworks as mental expressions was applied to some of his postulated intrinsic mental states,¹¹ then it would seem that after all a necessary vehicle/necessary representation model could be the basis for a possible non-propositional theory of art.

However, we cannot simply assume that mental states are vehicles rather than contents, for two reasons. First, Searle himself frequently talks of mental states as *having a certain*

intentional content, which content could itself be propositional. Also, his list of mental states include belief states, which Searle explicitly acknowledges as states that have a propositional content.¹² And as a second reason, recent intentionalist theories of consciousness have independently demonstrated the possibility that conscious mental states are constituted by representational *content*, rather than their being mental representations or vehicles.¹³ On the propositional model, the relevant conscious representational content would *itself* be propositional content. So even if one agrees with Searle that some conscious mental states could exist without having to postulate any *extra* mind-independent entities, an intentionalist theory of conscious content could already accept his main claims in a manner fully consistent with the propositional model.

An advantage of this compatibilist approach to Searle is that it helps to make fully comprehensible his basic disagreements with externalists about meaning. Searle insists that conscious intentionality is intrinsic primarily to emphasize that representational meaning depends on nothing that is external to the mind.¹⁴ His externalist critics instead think it is only in virtue of contingent causal links of the mind to reality that conscious mental states have the intentionality that they have. But what has not been adequately appreciated is that *both* sides could agree that conscious states are *contentful propositional* states, rather than representational vehicles. In addition, Searle too could accept that, for any particular brain state, it is *contingent* whether it has the conscious content that it has. For both sides could agree that if a brain structure were transplanted into some other region of the same brain, it could contingently cease to be, or alternatively start to be, the vehicle for a conscious intentional content. In sum, the

upshot of these points about conscious mental states is that Searle can plausibly be interpreted as *not* supporting the 'necessary vehicle/necessary representation' model after all, but instead as supporting the propositional 'contingent vehicle/necessary representation' model instead.

On the other hand, if there are any cases in which Searle's intrinsic intentional states are unavoidably vehicles that do not involve contents, so that he does support a 'necessary vehicle/necessary representation' model for such cases, his view could then be ruled out as being radically implausible because of the clear contingency of functioning of brain structures, as discussed above. So either way, any potential threat from views such as that of Searle has been defused.

IV. NV/NR: THE VEHICLE AS A NECESSARY STRUCTURAL PART OF AN ARTWORK

This section continues the discussion of putative aesthetic theories holding *both* that an artwork bears a necessary relation to its vehicle--i.e., a vehicle essentialism thesis--*and* that the artwork necessarily represents what it represents in a correctness-evaluable way. Of the three possible first-conjunct options for conjunctive theories of this type (see the previous section for a list), this section discusses the second option, according to which the vehicle could *non-identically constitute or embody*, or in some other way be *a necessary part of an ontological structure*, which is identified with the artwork. Also, as

mentioned previously, Arthur Danto's theory,¹⁵ according to which an artwork is a vehicle plus an interpretation, is probably the best-known theory of this type.

The current necessary structural part (NSP) approach avoids the immediate metaphysical implausibility of the first identity option, as discussed in the previous section. Here is a possible reconstruction of how Danto might have arrived at his own characteristic NSP view. To begin, Danto is a contextualist who believes that artworks are necessarily characterized in terms of their artistic history of creation, and which are also necessarily about their subject matter. It is the latter fact that makes him a supporter of the necessary representation thesis. Arguably Danto also accepts the physical contingency thesis (see section II), since it, plus his acceptance of necessary representation, entails his characteristic thesis that artworks are *not identical to 'mere real things'*, namely the relevant artistic vehicles. To spell out the proof of this entailment explicitly, a vehicle such as a painted canvas, as with any purely physical object or 'mere real thing', has all of its relational properties only contingently. But since artworks have some of their representational properties necessarily, no artwork is identical with a 'mere real thing' such as a physical vehicle.

Now Danto also wishes to hold that a vehicle somehow becomes 'transfigured' into an artwork by being appropriately *interpreted* by the artist as necessarily having a specific artistic history and aboutness. But his ontological problem is as follows. If an artwork is a vehicle plus an interpretation of it, one standard construal of that ontology would be that the interpretation is a *contingently acquired relational property* of the vehicle. To

interpret the vehicle is to bring it about that it acquires the relational property of having been interpreted as an artwork by the artist.

However, by hypothesis, any physical vehicle has all of its relational properties only contingently. As an illustration of this point, an artist can freely choose to interpret a vehicle as an artwork, but she need not do so. Hence the vehicle cannot acquire any *necessary* relational properties in virtue of its being thus artistically interpreted. It follows that this procedure cannot transform *the physical vehicle* into an artwork that possesses necessary relational properties. So some other construal or modification of Danto's ontology must be sought, in order to render it consistent with his contextualism.

Arguably it is for reasons such as these that Danto subscribes to a *necessary structural part* (NSP) ontology, in which both the interpretation and the vehicle are such necessary parts of an artwork. An artwork is a vehicle *plus* an interpretation, or the vehicle *embodies* the interpretation, or it is *part* of an artwork that also involves the interpretation.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there are at least two conclusive objections to such an NSP ontology, whether adopted by Danto or anyone else. The first is the result of a *logical predication* problem. It is central to Danto's interpretive approach that an interpretation transforms the vehicle into an artwork. So it must somehow be that the artist's interpretation transforms the *vehicle* into something that is necessarily about its subject matter. But since Danto accepts the physical contingency hypothesis, as argued above it cannot be the

vehicle that becomes necessarily about something. Presumably it is supposed to be instead the *artwork* of which it becomes true that it is necessarily about something.

But on the NSP construal, an artwork is an ontological structure having two fundamentally different kinds of parts. It makes no sense to suppose that *that structure itself* is necessarily about something. Hence the NSP construal cannot bring it about that *the artwork* is necessarily about something. At most one of its parts, namely the interpretation, is necessarily about something. But on Danto's account, the interpretation is not itself an artwork. In sum, on this NSP ontological construal, Danto--and anyone else adopting an NSP kind of ontology--ends up with a logically incoherent account of artwork predication. And in general, typical true predications of artworks would become incoherent category mistakes as predicated of NSP ontological structures.

The other conclusive objection to adoption of an NSP ontology is dependent on its dialectical connection with acceptance of the physical contingency thesis. Arguably the main reason for attempting to adopt an NSP ontology, with its prominent logical predication problems as just specified, would be in an attempt to escape from the insuperable problem that no physical vehicle, having purely contingent properties because of the physical contingency thesis, could also *itself* possess necessary artwork properties. So a more ontologically complex substitute is sought instead. Perhaps the thought is that, whatever the logical predication problems might be for such an NSP-defined artwork, at least it would be true of it that it necessarily has as a part the relevant artistic vehicle.

However, what would have been overlooked in any such attempt to ontologically yoke together a particular vehicle and a necessary meaning is that acceptance of the physical contingency thesis *already commits its supporters to a view of artwork identity that is inconsistent with the NSP ontology*. This may be shown as follows in the context of Danto's view. If the physical contingency thesis is true, then there is only a contingent association between a given vehicle, such as a particular canvas A, and any entity possessing necessary properties, such as an artwork X. In particular, just as it is contingent whether a particular vehicle A is interpreted as an artwork X or not, so also it is contingent, *for a given interpretation that would generate an artwork X*, whether that interpretation is applied to vehicle A, or to some other relevantly similar but numerically distinct vehicle B. To say that such a relation is a contingent one is to say that *the very same* artwork X, that contingently has object A as its vehicle, ontologically *could have had* as its vehicle some other, numerically distinct object B, while still retaining its identity as artwork X.

An argument in support of this contingency requirement for artworks is easy to provide. Visual artists, who presumably typically purchase canvases and paints in large amounts, care not at all as to *which particular* canvas or paint samples they use in creating a given artwork, as long as they are of the right types to conform to their artistic intentions. So from the artist's point of view, the very same artwork would result, no matter which canvas--whether canvas A, canvas B, etc.--or which particular paint samples of a given type she happened to interpret as an artwork X during a given artistic project.

However, the resulting problem for Danto and similarly-minded philosophers is that, if an artwork is an ontological structure necessarily having a particular vehicle as a part, the *identity-conditions* for artwork X have now been violated. Vehicles are not properties, but instead physical objects or events, each of which has its own distinctive numerical identity. So any artwork that ontologically included vehicle A would be an *ontologically distinct entity*--no matter what its internal structure might be--from any artwork that instead included a numerically distinct vehicle B. But this violates the initial physical contingency assumption that *one and the same* artwork X could be contingently associated with distinct particular vehicles under counterfactual conditions.

For those who are wary of arguments involving counterfactuals or possible worlds, a structurally similar problem for Danto is provided by any artwork having multiple *actual* copies, such as the print run for a given particular etching or photograph. Each of the prints is a print of one and the same artwork, but that could not be so if the distinct physical vehicles--the prints themselves--were each an ontological constituent of the relevant etching or photograph. The only way for Danto to restore consistency to situations such as these would be is for him to *repudiate* his mixed ontology--or more specifically, its vehicle essentialist assumption that a vehicle is any kind of ontological part or constituent of an artwork.

Linguistic cases of communication provide a useful point of comparison. It is utterly trivial that any number of distinct linguistic tokens of the same sentence type can express

one and the same proposition, because vehicle essentialism for linguistic expressions of propositions is obviously unacceptable and believed by no one. It should be equally trivial that there can be any number of (artistically authorized) distinct prints of the same photograph or etching for the same reason. And it is only a short extra step, involving some simple counterfactual reasoning, to the conclusion that singular artworks such as paintings also cannot ontologically include their vehicles either, because of their contingent association with some particular potential vehicle. The moral for Danto would be that, if he wishes to preserve the most central elements in his theory of art, namely the necessity of contextual and aboutness conditions for a given artwork, along with the non-identity of artworks with physical vehicles, then he would have to abandon his vehicle essentialism. For his contextualism entails the falsity of that view.

V. NV/NR: VEHICLES AS TOKENS OF A TYPE-BASED ARTWORK

This section continues the discussion of putative aesthetic theories holding both that an artwork bears a necessary relation to its vehicle--i.e., a vehicle essentialism thesis--and that the artwork necessarily represents what it represents in a correctness-evaluable way. Of the four possible first-conjunct options for conjunctive theories of this type (see section III for a list), this section discusses the third option, according to which the vehicle is a *token* or *instance* of the artwork considered as a type or kind.

Type theories are normally introduced in connection with artworks capable of being associated with multiple vehicles, such as a novel, film or piece of music.¹⁷ As applied to representational art forms, presumably the claim would be that a type-based artwork A is a *representational* type just in case tokens T of that artwork A count as representing a particular subject S *in virtue of* their possessing the relevant type-defining properties. The type-defining properties of a token T are those properties, possession of which is necessary and sufficient for token T to be a token of the relevant artwork type A. Hence in general tokens are *necessarily* tokens of a given type, in the just-mentioned sense that possession of the characteristics that define the type by the token is both necessary and sufficient for being a token of that type.

By contrast, linguistic vehicles are only contingently linked to the propositions they express, in that there is no subset of properties of a linguistic vehicle, possession of which by the vehicle is necessary and sufficient for it to express the relevant proposition. So any type theory of art, unlike a propositional theory, is automatically a *necessary vehicle* (NV) theory, in that the link between the token and the type is a necessary one.

Now a type theory is not, as such, committed to either a necessary or a contingent representation thesis for artworks. So the current brief discussion only concerns those type theories that *would* construe the relation as a necessary one, and hence fall into the current NV/NR category. (See section 7 for a discussion of NV/CR-style type theories). To begin, as an alternative to a type theory, a propositional theory can consistently hold both that a propositionally-construed artwork A is necessarily related to its subject S (i.e.,

necessary representation), and yet that the vehicle is only contingently related to the subject, because of the contingency of the relation between a vehicle and the proposition it expresses.

But by contrast, in the case of type theories, the necessity of the link between tokens and the corresponding type does not permit this flexibility to obtain. If the type-based artwork A necessarily represents the relevant subject S, this must be because each of its tokens T necessarily represents subject S, plus the fact that the relevant property of necessarily representing subject S is one of the characteristics, possession of which is necessary and sufficient for token T to be a token of type A. It is only in this manner that a type theory permits a clear sense to be given to the claim that type A *itself* necessarily represents subject S.

However, there are at least two fatal flaws in this version of an NV/NR theory. The relevant type theory, as just described, must hold that *each token itself* necessarily represents the relevant subject S. But this violates the *physical contingency thesis* for the relevant token vehicles, and hence it is committed to an unmotivated and extreme metaphysical view having no clear relevance to artworks. And second, the representational relations of vehicles to subjects clearly depend on contingent artistic decisions, which for that specific reason rules out any possibility that vehicles themselves could necessarily represent subjects. Hence, to conclude, any type-based NV/NR theory would be conceptually unacceptable.

VI. NV/NR: NECESSITY OF ORIGIN ARGUMENTS

This section concludes the discussion of putative aesthetic theories holding both that an artwork bears a necessary relation to its vehicle--i.e., a vehicle essentialism thesis--and that the artwork necessarily represents what it represents in a correctness-evaluable way. Of the four possible first-conjunct options for conjunctive theories of this type (see section III for a list), this section discusses the fourth option, involving putative *necessity of origin* cases. Roughly, such cases involve a claim is that it is possible that a vehicle, during and subsequent to the creation of an artwork, *could become* necessarily related to that artwork, even though it was a contingent matter, prior to the creation of the artwork, whether an artwork was associated with that vehicle.

Necessity of origin cases are familiar from the work of Kripke. For example, he argues that a child necessarily has the parents it has, even though it was a contingent decision of the parents to have that child, so that they are only contingently related to it.¹⁸ So in terms of the physical contingency thesis invoked throughout this paper, either Kripkean arguments deny that it holds in some empirical cases, or they claim that sometimes it holds only *unidirectionally*--as in the claim that parents are only contingently related to their child, even though the child is necessarily related to the parents. Hence, as applied to artworks, the claim would be that, even though a vehicle is only contingently associated with an artwork, nevertheless the artwork is necessarily associated with a particular vehicle. Such Kripkean arguments, if successful, might be hoped to help avoid

the insoluble dilemmas discussed in the previous section for supporters of necessary structural part (NSP) artwork ontologies who also accept the physical contingency thesis as generally being true for physical items.

However, Kripkean necessity of origin arguments depend on a necessary identification thesis that is either false or question-begging as applied to artworks. Kripke's argument about a child's necessary origins depend on a claim that the relevant child *cannot be identified as such*, independently of her reproductive origins in her own particular parents. The analogous claim for an artwork would be that it cannot be identified as such, independently of its particular vehicle. But as applied to the multiple, artistically authorized prints of a particular artwork (see section 4), clearly it is false that the relevant artwork cannot be identified independently of any one particular print of it.

As for the question-begging case, consider an artwork having only a single actual vehicle, such as a painting. The previous section showed that if the physical contingency thesis is true, then the very same artwork could have been associated with a numerically distinct vehicle, and hence that the artwork *could* be identified independently of its particular actual vehicle. So a Kripkean necessary identification thesis would apply to a painting only if the physical contingency thesis is false for artworks (so that the artwork could not have had a vehicle distinct from its actual vehicle).

Now in the case of relations of children to their parents, there are *independent* metaphysical reasons of a biological kind for holding that they are necessarily related to

their parents, and hence that the physical contingency thesis is false for them, so a Kripkean argument is applicable to such a case. But in the case of singular-vehicle artworks such as paintings, there are no such independent metaphysical reasons. Hence it would merely be question-begging to *assume* that the physical contingency thesis is false for the relations of vehicles and artworks. But without that assumption the Kripkean argument cannot be applied to such singular-vehicle artworks. Nor is the issue merely an unresolved standoff, because as argued in section V, artists typically care little or nothing for which *particular* canvas or paint samples they happen to use, so that artistic practice strongly favors a vehicle contingency interpretation of such singular artwork creation cases.

The difference between legitimate necessity of origin cases--if any--and artwork cases can be clarified as follows. If Kripke is right about children, a given child *could not come into existence at all* unless it is true both that its particular parents existed, and that they had that particular child. However, no such strong thesis is true for a particular artwork in relation to its vehicle. Consider the particular vehicle for Leonardo's painting *Mona Lisa*. If that particular canvas and configuration of paint samples had never existed, Leonardo would simply have used some other canvas and paint samples with which to paint the *Mona Lisa*. Perhaps a hypothetical child could necessarily not exist because of the contingent non-existence of its parents, but no artist has ever been necessarily prevented from creating an artwork by the contingent non-existence of a potential vehicle for it.¹⁹

Hence, to sum up this section, necessity of origin arguments are of no help in providing an independent defense of a vehicle essentialism claim for artworks that necessarily represent their subjects. This also concludes the demonstration, as presented in this and the previous three sections, that the 'necessary vehicle/necessary representation' (NV/NR) modal conjunctive thesis cannot provide a possible metaphysical basis for a theory of the relations of artworks to their vehicles.

A broader comment concerns the basic, intuitively compelling parallels between propositional and artistic cases, as presented in section II. It certainly *seems* as if it is true both that a) artworks stand in a contingent relation to their vehicles, and b) that artworks as such necessarily represent what they do, so that the propositional model at least *seems* to apply just as well to artworks as it does to propositions. Hence there is an intuitive premium on opposing conjunctive views which at least could explain, or explain away, the *apparent* truth of both conjuncts of the propositional view. Versions two and four of the NV/NR approach (sections IV and the current section) arguably offered the best chances for NV/NR views to explain both apparent features of the propositional view. This is because both versions can acknowledge *some* appearance of contingency in the relation of a vehicle to an artwork--even though both ultimately reject it on theoretical grounds--while also accepting as correct the NR part of the conjunctive propositional claim. So it is primarily their failure, rather than the failure of version 1 (see section III) that disappoints any hopes that NV/NR advocates might have had for an intuitively convincing rival to the propositional view.

VII. NV/CR AND CV/CR VIEWS

To begin, NV/CR views will be discussed. In the case of single-vehicle artworks, the most plausible form of this view holds that artwork and vehicle are identical. In the case of multiple-vehicle artworks such as novels and musical performances, a type view is common, holding that the relevant vehicles are tokens of an artwork type. As pointed out in section 5, on a type view vehicles are necessarily related to any types that they instantiate, so this view can also qualify as an NV/CR view.²⁰

The primary issue with respect to any NV/CR view is that of how an individual vehicle relates to the subject that supposedly it represents. So any differences between identity and type views of the role of vehicles will not be relevant here, and hence they will be ignored. For simplicity the discussion will concentrate on the identity view for singular artworks.

The conjunctive NV/CR view that singular artworks are 1) identical with their vehicles, and 2) only contingently represent anything, can seem intuitively convincing for the following reason. In the section 1 discussion of the propositional view, it was pointed out that the standard propositional model of linguistic communication denies the possibility of contingent representation by linguistic vehicles, on the ground that it illegitimately compresses into one supposed stage what are in fact two distinct relational stages of contingent expression and necessary representation. Nevertheless, what the propositional

view would regard as an illegitimate compression, in the case of artworks--namely the opposing view that there is really only one stage of contingent representation by an artwork that is identical with the relevant vehicle--might seem to have at least some initial intuitive credibility.

In particular, it might seem obvious both that the physical surface of a painting or drawing *could* itself represent some worldly item--so that the artwork is identical with the vehicle--and that any such physical vehicle only contingently represents what it represents, because representation depends on contingent cultural factors such as representational conventions and the intentions of the artist as realized through use of those conventions. To be sure, the propositional view can also fully explain the contingency of cultural factors in terms of contingent expression of artworks conforming to the propositional model, but this does not by itself diminish the initial credibility of the opposing NV/CR view as a *prima facie* legitimate alternative. Hence perhaps it is not surprising that almost all writers on pictorial representational or depiction seem to have assumed the truth of this kind of identity-based NV/CR view, by default if not explicitly.

Nevertheless, this NV/CR view cannot accommodate the section 1 intuition that there is a significant distinction to be made between a representational *artwork*--specified in terms of its necessary reference and correctness conditions--and one or more *vehicle* that contingently expresses it. So any broadly contextualist view of the identity of artworks, that views artworks as necessarily having some of their artistic properties, cannot be made consistent with an NV/CR view. Another significant failing for non-type NV/CR

views is that they are not generalizable to multiple-copy artworks, since of course the distinct multiple copies could not all be identical with a single artwork.

But in order to achieve a decisive refutation of any NV/CR view, more needs to be said, as follows. To begin, as already noted, both the propositional CV/NR and the identity-based NV/CR views can agree that relations between a vehicle and a represented subject are regulated by contingent social conventions. The propositional view is that the regulation takes a particular form in which the vehicle expresses an *intermediary entity*--a proposition--that in turn is necessarily about the subject, and necessarily characterizes it in some correctness-evaluable way. By contrast, the NV/CR view attempts to dispense with any such intermediary or mediating entity, presumably by invoking some simpler, more direct link between a vehicle and the artwork's subject. But if it could be shown that any such direct system of representational conventions had fundamental and widely recognized conceptual flaws, then the NV/CR view would fail because of its *conceptual inadequacy*. This is what will be shown below.

Reduced to its simplest form, a representational convention is *a rule, norm or standard R that relates a vehicle V to a worldly subject S*. In order to be a representational rule at all, R must do two things. First, it must specify the conditions under which a given use of a vehicle V shall count as having produced a reference to some subject S: the *reference* conditions. And second, rule R must specify the conditions under which that same use of vehicle V shall count as having produced a correct or incorrect representation of S, in thus referring to S: the *correctness* conditions. The NV/CR view is that the rule R

directly maps the vehicle V onto the subject S via a specification of *both* reference *and* correctness conditions for the relation, with no semantic intermediary being involved.

However, my claim is that, though such a rule directly linking V and S would be possible for reference conditions alone, *it is not possible for correctness conditions*. The basic reasons as to why this is so are already familiar from discussions of resemblance theories of depiction.²¹ To begin, the problem with attempting to claim that vehicle V represents subject S because of the resemblances between V and S is that there are an indefinitely large number both of resemblances and dissimilarities between *any* two physical items. Without some further specification of the relevant respects in which V and S must resemble each other, no determinacy of representation would have been achieved.

Suppose that a direct rule attempts to fully specify the relevant respects, v1, v2, ...vi in V, and s1, s2, ..si in S, in which V and S must resemble each other for V to represent the corresponding respects ...si in S. Even so, this specification of which properties of S count as being represented by V provides no standards specifically geared to *correctness* of representation. It provides no explanation whatsoever of how V might *misrepresent* some of the properties of S. Indeed, that no such purely *correlational* account of representation--based on nothing more than pairing off characteristics of V with corresponding characteristics of S--can explain misrepresentation is now almost universally accepted outside aesthetics.²²

On the other hand, an indirect or mediating rule, explained in terms of a propositional semantic intermediary, is fully able to explain both the reference and the correctness aspects of representation. A linguistic example can help to clarify how such a genuinely mediating rule works. In an initial stage, a sub-rule is required to relate a conventional linguistic vehicle, such as the words 'the book is blue', to a proposition claiming that some book being referred to is blue. And in a second stage, that proposition must be related to the worldly state of affairs that make it true or false. Hence, to generalize, a representational rule *R* *mediates* between vehicle *V* and subject *S* just in case *the rule can be uniquely broken down into two distinct sub-rules R_v and R_s*, as follows. Sub-rule *R_v* specifies a mapping from vehicle *V* to a proposition *P*, so that *V expresses* proposition *P*. Then sub-rule *R_s* in turn specifies a mapping from proposition *P* onto some worldly subject or fact. So, to summarize in the linguistic case, a token of the sentence 'the book is blue' *expresses* a proposition, which in turn *representationally maps onto* a particular worldly object, that makes the proposition either true or false.

In addition, any indirect representation rule relating a vehicle *V* and a subject *S* *must* be decomposable in this two-stage manner, for otherwise *it would be impossible to cognitively implement the rule in a usable way*. In real-world situations, perception of a vehicle initially supplies information only about the vehicle itself. If there was no sub-rule *R_v* for a given vehicle that specified how its features map onto a corresponding proposition *P*, then a representational interpretation of the vehicle could not even begin. And without a cognitive implementation of the second sub-rule *R_s* as well, that specifies what object *S* the proposition *P* maps onto, along with the correctness-conditions for

proposition P, the overall rule R would have failed in its *overall* mediating role of providing normative standards for how a use of vehicle V can correctly or incorrectly represent object S.

A more intuitive account of the benefits provided by a propositional mediating rule will now be given. In the face of the indefinite complexity of the two physical items vehicle V and subject S, the propositional approach employs a divide-and-conquer strategy, via specifying a *narrow, conceptually defined intermediate entity* having two functions.

With respect to vehicle V, its function is to provide a precise, conceptually limited target-paradigmatically a representation of a single object and a single property. So the task for sub-rule R_v of setting up an 'expression' mapping from V to proposition P is *a much simpler task* than the provision of arbitrary mappings from V to S would be. And second, with respect to subject S, the conceptual simplicity of proposition P reduces the issue of correctness to a single respect: does S have the property specified in proposition P, or doesn't it? Since reference to S is already secured by proposition P, the proposition can be either correct or incorrect about S, hence allowing for the possibility of misrepresentation as well as representation of S by V.

The upshot of this discussion is that, contrary to what many must have assumed in aesthetics, *there is no conceptually adequate way to avoid an account of representational rules that gives them a fundamental mediating role* between a vehicle and a subject. Any direct account fails both to explain the possibility of misrepresentation, and also fails to explain the *conceptually specific* way in which representation is achieved.

To complete this section, CV/CR views should briefly be mentioned. On such a view, the relation of the vehicle to the artwork is a contingent one, *and* the relation of the artwork to its subject is also a contingent one. But such a view provides no clear ontological or semantic role for a distinct artwork at all, even though there must *be* one, since the vehicle is only contingently related to the artwork on this view. It is hard to see how a view having this conjunctive profile could seem even *prima facie* attractive or defensible.

VIII. IS THE PROPOSITIONAL THESIS A HOSTAGE TO NATURALISTIC FORTUNE?

There are two ways of looking at the arguments in the previous section. One is that the failures of attempts to naturalize misrepresentation, whether in the case of pictures, language, perception, or in cognition generally, show the universality and unavoidability of the propositional model in all fields, so that aesthetics should join in that consensus. But another way of looking at the arguments is that in the twenty-first century there is no respectable metaphysical alternative to a naturalized semantics, so that at some more fundamental level propositional models must be abandoned or overthrown, even in paradigm linguistic cases. From this latter point of view the almost universal rejection of propositional approaches in aesthetics is likely to be applauded, rather than rejected as conceptually unsound or anachronistic.

However, an important contribution that aesthetics can make to this broad debate is as follows. Basically this paper has attempted to show that once an intuitive conceptual distinction is accepted between artworks and vehicles, on roughly similar lines to that between propositions and linguistic vehicles, then at least one precisely definable conjunctive modal propositional thesis becomes *unavoidable*, in that alternatives quite literally cannot be clearly conceived as potentially workable theories. Now this demonstration did not depend on any substantive assumptions about the nature or scientific status of propositions or propositional models in cognition generally. Hence it should not be taken as automatically setting up barriers to a naturalized semantics, of a kind that subsequently would have to be demolished by scientifically minded philosophers.

The mere fact that it has well served our cultural purposes to have a concept of an artwork that is distinct from that of a vehicle *could not*, in and of itself, have any such substantive anti-naturalistic implications. Nor could the analogous distinction of linguistic vehicle from propositional content in the case of language. The field of aesthetics provides rich test cases showing the unavoidability of such a minimalist propositional view, so now naturalists must refine or redefine their view so as to remove any appearance of conflict with it, whether in artistic or linguistic cases.

To be sure, it is open to other philosophers to find something question-begging or otherwise unacceptable in accounts that distinguish artworks from vehicles. The NV/CR

model discussed in the previous section is a model that rejects the distinction.

Nevertheless, I attempted to show that, even if it is assumed that artworks are identical with their vehicles, *intractable misrepresentation problems* still arise that only a broadly propositional model--invoking mediating rather than direct representational rules--could resolve. But there too there is nothing inherently anti-naturalistic in the arguments or methods used.

Indeed, arguably the strongest point in favor of the mediating propositional view is a specifically *conceptual* argument about the *indispensable conceptual utility* of intermediary, stipulative propositional definitions of reference and correctness conditions for representations. Since both sides agree that representation is a matter of contingent social conventions, which are stipulated or agreed on among the parties to the agreement, it cannot be anti-naturalistic to precisely locate the primary stipulative force of such agreements in mediating propositional structures, rather than as somehow being implicit in representational rules that directly link vehicles to what they represent. So here too, it must be a mistake to criticize the propositional approach on purely naturalistic grounds.

These points against premature naturalistic objections to propositional approaches may be summarized and expanded on as follows. A naturalistic semantic theory has to naturalize the whole cognitive process by means of which we use representational structures, whether in aesthetics or elsewhere, to understand and control the world. But there is more than one potential way to go about that naturalization. Previously it has been widely assumed that correlational approaches to representation provide the only possible

approach to doing so.²³ The assumption was that propositional representation would turn out merely to be a special, reducible case of correlational representation. However, one appropriate moral that could be drawn from this paper is that any such reduction *should rather go in the other direction*. The kinds of correlation characteristic of representational cases, whether in the arts or elsewhere, need to be explained in *propositional* terms, and so naturalistic theories of cognition should concentrate on directly naturalizing cognitive uses of propositional structures. In such an approach, representation would be understood in terms of propositional cognitive processing, rather than vice versa.

It would take us too far afield to investigate this important issue further here. But at least it should be said that the current suggestion is not a radical one from a generic cognitive science point of view. It is widely accepted that the representational contents of cognitive states should be explained in broadly propositional or truth-evaluable terms. My suggestion is only that prior attempts to *naturalize* such structures have been misconceived for the reasons given above, and hence that naturalistic concerns provide no legitimate impediment to acceptance of the results of this essay.

IX. THE UNAVOIDABILITY OF A PROPOSITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF REPRESENTATION

This section will provide some broader arguments as to why any kinds of representation *must* be propositional. To begin, consider the following argument. If an artwork vehicle *V* is to be able to either *represent* or *misrepresent* some actual worldly subject *S*--whether directly or indirectly--then the following must be true. First, vehicle *V* must have a representational content *C*, in virtue of which it represents *S*. Second, that content *C* must be such that in virtue of it, *V represents subject S as having some property P*. And third, it must be determinate as to whether *S* does in fact have property *P*.

The primary issue is whether the second condition can hold without *V* having a specifically *propositional* content. The concern is as follows. Suppose *V*'s content *C* is not a propositional content. Then the second condition, that *V* represents subject *S* as having property *P*, is not one that follows simply from the propositional content of *C*, since by hypothesis it has none. But the content *C* of *V* must at least be such that *V*'s possession of that content *entails* that *V* represents subject *S* as having property *P*, or *V* would simply fail to have any representational relation to *S*. But entailment is a *propositional* relation, possible only for entities whose contents are truth-evaluable. Hence, after all, the content *C* of vehicle *V* must be propositional.

A broader version of the same problem arises from any attempt to specify in general terms what 'the content' of a representational vehicle is supposed to be. For example, it is

fairly typical to define the *content* of a representational vehicle as being the properties it represents its subject as having.²⁴ But to anyone who does not already understand the relevant concept of content, all that they can fall back on is the standard propositional conception. For example, the proposition 'the book is blue' represents the relevant book *as having the property of being blue*, and it is true just in case the book is blue. So arguably we could not even *learn to understand* the concept of 'the content' of a non-linguistic vehicle, independently of having a prior understanding of vehicles functioning in a propositional way.

In opposition to this, it might be thought that in the case of realistic pictures, one could simply recognize directly which subject they represent, and whether they do so correctly, whether or not one had any cognitive mechanisms for propositional understanding. However, such a claim is about a *hypothetical epistemic mechanism for grasping* the content of a picture, not about the content itself as such. As for the content itself, see the initial argument above in this section as to why it must be propositional.

A related point is as follows. Perception of a highly realistic picture of a situation, such as that of a cat being on a mat, is similar to perception of the situation itself, in that similar sensory stimuli are received in each case. By contrast, perception of the linguistic vehicle 'the cat is on the mat' involves completely dissimilar sensory data from that received from such a situation. So it might be thought that the representational content of the picture would have a structure closer to that of perceptual content than that of linguistically expressed propositional content. However, the problem with this intuition

is that on standard views of perceptual content, *it itself* typically provides propositionally structured, correctness-evaluable content.²⁵

This is not to deny that *some* perceptual content may be non-conceptual, and hence not clearly propositionally structured. Arguably, such cases, if any,²⁶ would simply involve perceptual content that is *not representational* content. For instance, a raw ability to distinguish one color shade from another, neither of which one has a concept for, could have a cognitive utility in producing discriminative behavior with respect to them, even if the only representation involved is of a generic sort, such as that of both shades being represented as being shades of red. Hence such cases could not show that some representational content is non-propositionally structured.

To sum up this section, these arguments for a propositional view are potentially so powerful as to render all of the other arguments unnecessary. For example, if our very understanding of the concept of representation requires it to be propositionally construed, then any theories involving conjunctive modal pairs inconsistent with the propositional contingent vehicle/necessary representation (CV/NR) pair could, in the abstract, be dismissed without further examination. Nevertheless, there is more to a well-structured aesthetic theory than just representational considerations, and it is only by showing the unworkability of alternatives in detail that the full strengths of a propositional approach can be appreciated.

X. IS ART ITSELF UNAVOIDABLY PROPOSITIONAL?

This paper has only explicitly addressed representational forms of art that integrally include representations of actual worldly objects, events etc. So it might be thought that its conclusions could be escaped by sundry varieties of quarantine operations, by means of which art proper might be hoped to be isolated from such propositional contaminants. For example, it might be held that aesthetic qualities concern only what would be in common between representational and imaginative kinds of depiction, expression and so on, so that they are not inherently representational and hence not inherently propositional. Or formalists might insist that this paper provides yet more evidence that art proper must be purely formal. Or representational art might be reclassified as a form of fictional make-believe. And so on.

This is a big topic, but a few brief reminders may serve to dim such hopes. The first reminder is that issues about the nature of art cannot be divorced from issues about the nature of artistic cognition. The latter are broadly issues within the purview of cognitive science, and cognitive science is saturated with broadly propositional views concerning cognitive representation of any kinds of data whatsoever. If science demonstrates that our cognition of artworks works in a certain kind of way, or has a certain kind of broadly propositional structure, then any aesthetic theories inconsistent with those findings must be dismissed as so much science fiction. Metaphysics and epistemology may be able to hold science at bay, but aesthetics is ineluctably grounded in the actual structures of

human cognition. (Possibly an exception could be defended for aesthetic value theory, as for ethics, but that would not affect what art is and how it works).

A second reminder is that the representational is not confined to the figurative.

Kandinsky and Kline both are about how certain structures of colors or shapes can relate to others within the same artworks, and thus refer to or comment on each other, just as the most literal of representational painters can comment on her subject by how she chooses to represent it. The development section of a symphony is about how one of its main themes could be developed, and a careless composer could write music that misrepresented rather than correctly represented some aspect of the relevant theme while writing the development section. So even the most formal of formalist works must be apt for forms of cognitive appreciation that are heavily dependent on intentional and representational concepts.

A third reminder is about the implications of the holistic power of impure art. A composer such as Verdi could decide to include some passages providing covert criticism of current rulers or political trends in his operas, or, under pressures from censors, he could decide to omit them. It strains credulity to the breaking point to assume that the ontological and semantic structure of the relevant works would become radically different, or radically bifurcated, if the representational elements were included rather than excluded. So, more explicitly, the current reminder is that, since it is highly implausible to suppose that the whole ontology and semantics of a kind of art could be entirely disrupted by the intrusion of a few, quite possibly minor or subtle external

representational elements, and since those elements have to be explained propositionally, then we have no choice but to construe the whole ontology and semantics of the relevant art form in a manner consistent with broadly propositional views of art.

Also, this third reminder meshes well with the first. It is highly implausible to suppose that art-related cognitive mechanisms, which must have developed under broad pressure from a wide variety of evolutionary factors, could also be so exquisitely sensitive to idiosyncratic details of Verdi's compositional intentions that fundamentally different cognitive mechanisms would be triggered--both in him, and in the broad audience for opera--should he have decided to pour scorn on the authorities in a particular passage or plot detail. So, to summarize, even if there are a few cases or areas in which art is not broadly representational, the ontology and meaningful content of those areas could not fundamentally diverge from the propositional model in any case.

XI. WHAT WOULD A PROPOSITIONAL THEORY OF ART LOOK LIKE?

There remains a gap in the argumentation of this paper. It is one thing to argue that only one kind of aesthetic theory is *possible*. It is another thing to convince skeptical readers that any such theory could ever be made *plausible*. As an analogy, eliminativist theories of midsized objects and people in metaphysics are unlikely ever to be generally accepted because of their fundamental implausibility, no matter how strong are their arguments for

the metaphysical impossibility of midsized objects and persons. So if a diagnosis is needed as to why broadly propositional theories of art are not already widespread in aesthetics, an initial plausibility gap is as good a diagnosis as any. No one is going to accept a whole new category of theory sight unseen, whether in aesthetics or elsewhere, so it might brusquely be argued that proponents of propositional theories need to 'put up or shut up'. Purely negative arguments will never convince by themselves. If there is indeed a foundational crisis in aesthetics, we need at least some idea of what could be done to address it, before anyone is likely fully to accept its existence. Also, the positive offerings had better be at least as good as what they seek to replace, or they will still gain no acceptance.

This paper is already long enough, so this is not the place in which to systematically articulate and defend such a theory. One possible propositional theory has been defended elsewhere in detail,²⁷ so here are just a few initial ideas drawn from it as to how the initial plausibility gap for such theories might be bridged.²⁸ To begin, everyone accepts that representational vehicles have a content, in virtue of which they represent their subject. But since propositional theories insist that a propositional structure must *mediate* between vehicle and subject, they are committed to a *double*, or *two-level*, theory of content for vehicles. Just as linguistic vehicles have or express a proposition or propositional content, which in turn represents some actual fact, so also must artistic vehicles have or express an artistic content, which in turn represents some fact. So on propositional theories, vehicles have a propositional content that in turn has its own representational content--hence, as a result, vehicles must have a double or two-tier kind of content.

As a result, propositional theories predict the theoretical possibility of two important kinds of *ambiguity* in artistic vehicles. First, since the propositional artwork content is only contingently linked to, and hence distinct from the vehicle on propositional theories, a single vehicle could *potentially express more than one artwork*. So any evidence for the potential artistic ambiguity of vehicles would tend to support propositional theories rather than their opponents.

Here is one simple argument to that effect. A picture necessarily represents an object such as a house as being in some particular orientation, such as in its normal upright orientation with the roof above the foundations. Now a picture of an upright house must be distinct from a picture of an inverted house, because each has a distinct subject. But if the relevant artistic vehicle is inverted, the following ambiguity becomes apparent. The result is either an *inverted* picture of an *upright* house, or an *upright* picture of an *inverted* house. The two putative pictures must be distinct because of their distinct subjects, but they are associated with only a single vehicle. Hence the vehicle also must be distinct from each of the pictures, and be such that potentially it *ambiguously expresses either of them*--hence supporting a propositional theory.

A second ambiguity-based kind of argument in favor of propositional theories invokes stylistic considerations, as follows. It seems not to have been generally noticed that any stylistically distinctive movements in the visual arts, such as impressionism or fauvism, result in artistic vehicles that readily support potentially ambiguous interpretations. Since

a single vehicle surface has to supply both stylistic and subject information, the vigorous brushstrokes of impressionist styles, such as in a portrait of someone, are potentially ambiguous between impressionist stylistic information and realistic subject information about the artist's subject. So, depending on how those brushstrokes are interpreted, an impressionist canvas either expresses an impressionist picture that accurately represents the artist's subject, or a realistic, *non*-impressionist picture that hideously misrepresents the sitter as having brushstroke-like markings all over her face. But since a picture that correctly represents a subject cannot be identical with a picture that incorrectly represents the same subject, again a potential pictorial ambiguity results that supports a propositional approach, in that two distinct pictures potentially are expressed by the same vehicle.

In each of the examples given, the propositional theory not only can predict and explain the relevant putative ambiguities, but it is unclear how rival theories could do so--even if, *contra* the arguments of this paper, one temporarily grants, for the sake of argument, their coherence as possible rival theories. For example, the identity-based NV/CR theory, which identifies vehicle and artwork, must hold that the two paintings are *identical*--since each is identical with the same vehicle--while it also provides no account whatsoever as to what it is for the vehicle to *contingently misrepresent* its subject in the realistic case, since the theory must also claim that the same vehicle would correctly represent the same subject in the other impressionist case.

For present purposes these brief illustrations of the potential theoretical power of a broadly propositional theory of art must suffice.²⁹

XII. CONCLUSION

I have argued for some strong theses in this paper, as part of my defense of the propositional indispensability thesis. One thesis is that there is no clearly conceivable alternative to a conjunctive modal thesis of a propositional sort (contingent vehicle and necessary representation) in aesthetics. A second, more specific thesis is that those who adopt some conjunctive modal thesis that enables them to identify artworks and vehicles are subject to the same fundamental kinds of misrepresentation problems that bedevil attempts to provide a naturalized semantics for cognitive representation generally--as well as failing to explain the conceptually specific nature of representation. A third thesis is that our very understanding of the basic concept of representation, no matter in what field it is deployed, is unavoidably a propositional one, so that any alternative conception is literally inconceivable. So, to the extent that these challenges have been well supported, and given that virtually no one currently, or in the last hundred years or so, subscribes or has subscribed to such a propositional view in aesthetics, it would be legitimate to conclude that the subject is in an ongoing state of crisis because of its unexamined and largely incoherent foundations.

Reinforcing this conclusion is the fact that, to the minimal extent that propositional views of art have been discussed at all, there has been a general tendency to confuse them with some *content-specific* thesis--such as the highly implausible narrow translatability thesis, namely that all kinds of artistic content can be translated without remainder into a linguistically expressible propositional form. Also, the only other marginally relevant kind of discussion in the offing--as associated with the standard contrast between the purely conventional nature of the relation between linguistic sentence types and propositions, versus supposedly non-conventional relations between picture types and their representational meanings--also fails to identify and engage with the fundamental ontological and semantic issues concerning propositional versus putative non-propositional conceptions of representational art, as discussed here.

As for what aesthetics would look like were a propositional revolution to be successful, gone would be all NV/NR theories in their original forms, such as Danto's categorically mixed ontological artwork structures and incoherent predications.³⁰ Also gone would be all theories of depiction that identify artwork and vehicle—which is a peculiar form of vehicle worship or fetishism from the propositional perspective, which no one would seriously entertain for a moment in the case of linguistic vehicles.³¹

To be sure, the alternate propositional theory briefly sketched in the previous section might itself be wrong, or inadequate in various respects. Certainly also rival propositional theories need to be developed, so that both supporters and opponents of this class of theories have a wider range of issues and examples to investigate. But one way

or another, the propositional challenges presented in this paper urgently need to be addressed. For to all visible appearances, such foundational issues regarding the nature of aesthetic meaning and truth have never been adequately raised or discussed throughout the modern history of aesthetics since Frege.

Perhaps, on the other hand, convincing replies to all of the main arguments in this paper could be provided by resourceful opponents. Nothing more could be desired--for in that case we would finally be *engaged in* this urgently needed debate after all these years, however it may turn out.³²

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NOTES

¹ E.g., among recent writers, Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Roger Scruton, 'Photography and Representation', *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981), pp. 577-603; Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987); and Berys Gaut, 'Cinematic Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), pp. 299-312.

² For a representative sample of essays see ed. Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³ E.g., Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt, 1958); Danto, *Transfiguration*; Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*; Scruton, 'Photography and Representation'; Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968); Amy Schmitter, 'About Representation', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000), pp. 255-272.

⁴ A method employed by Robert Yanal in 'The Danto-Wollheim Meaning Theory of Art', *Ratio* 9 (1996), pp. 56-67.

⁵ As argued by Gaut in 'Cinematic Art'.

⁶ In works such as 'On Sense and Reference', in Peter Geach and Max Black (Eds.), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, 2d. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960).

⁷ The concept of an artwork will be understood broadly enough to include miscellaneous cases having little or no aesthetic interest or value, such as vacation snapshots or TV documentaries.

⁸ See, e.g., Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

⁹ Discussed by Paisley Livingston in his 'Intention in Art', in ed. Jerrold Levinson, *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 275-290.

¹⁰ John Searle, *Intentionality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Ch. 8.

¹¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

¹² Searle, *Intentionality*, Ch. 1.

¹³ E.g., Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); William Lycan, *Consciousness and Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Searle, *Intentionality*, passim.

¹⁵ As presented in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

¹⁶ For these and other alternatives see Danto's 'Responses and Replies' in ed. Mark Rollins, *Danto and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), as well as *Transfiguration*.

¹⁷ E.g., Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), Chs. 4 and 5. There are numerous critical discussions of type theories in the arts, but the present paper considers only their conjunctive modal characteristics.

¹⁸ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), Lecture III.

¹⁹ Nothing in this section is intended to deny that an artwork itself, as opposed to its contingent relations to its vehicle, may have necessary factors in its origins, such as having been produced by a particular artist. For a recent thesis of this kind see Guy

Rohrbaugh, 'I Could Have Done That', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005), pp. 209-228.

²⁰ More sophisticated type theories, holding e.g. that artworks are *indicated* types rather than types simpliciter are also possible, e.g., Levinson's in his *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, but such theories have the same basic defects as simple type theories, so they will not be discussed separately.

²¹ E.g., Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Ch. 1.

²² Typical approaches involve explanations of representation in terms of nomic covariance or correlation of worldly qualities with sensory input qualities, e.g. Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), and Jerry Fodor, *A Theory of Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990)--an approach now generally recognized to be incapable of explaining misrepresentation by itself. Some independent factor, such as a historically defined teleological concept of normal function, e.g. as in Ruth Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), is needed for this purpose. But, as one sample problem, this leaves it completely unclear how freshly created artworks without an evolutionary history could acquire an ability to misrepresent.

²³ E.g., Dretske, *ibid.* and Fodor, *ibid.*

²⁴ E.g., Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, pp. 3-4.

²⁵ E.g., John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁶ Their existence is defended by Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*.

²⁷ John Dilworth, *The Double Content of Art* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005).

²⁸ Parenthetically, the present paper shows that one claim in the book needs to be revised, namely that there is a kind of map-like representation that is not propositionally depictive, in that the map vehicle seems to directly represent a landscape without any propositional intermediary being required. However, I would now re-interpret such cases, and others related to them, as involving a mixture of propositional representation plus simple, non-representational structural comparisons between map configurations and actual landscape configurations.

²⁹ For additional summaries see my articles 'A Double Content Theory of Artistic Representation', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005), pp. 249-260; and 'In Support of Content Theories of Art', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85 (2007), pp. 19-39.

³⁰ But recall from Section IV that in my view, the rest of Danto's important theory could survive unscathed if he were to give up the necessary vehicle assumption.

³¹ For further discussion of this point see the end of section IV.

³² My thanks to the Editor, Peter Lamarque, for very helpful comments.