

How (Not) to Be a Buck-Passer About Art

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Abstract: According to buck-passers about art, such as Dominic Lopes, every work of art belongs to some art. I distinguish two versions of the buck-passing theory of art—what I call the double-buck-passers' (DBP) view and the single-buck-passers' (SBP) view—and point out that Lopes's view is an instance of the latter. Then I argue the SBP view faces a dilemma, each horn of which leads to trouble. In doing so, I explore uncharted territory: the implications of vagueness for theories of art. I conclude that buck-passers should not be single-buck-passers.

Key words: theories of art, buck-passing theory of art, vagueness, art and artworks, art and the arts

1. THE BUCK-PASSING THEORY OF ART

According to buck-passers about art, such as Dominic Lopes (2008, 2014),

Buck-passers' basic claim: (For any x) x is a work of art iff, and because, x is a work of (at least) one of the arts,

where the arts are believed to include painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, music, and so on. To a first approximation, buck-passers are so called because in building a theory of art, they require other types of theory to do, as it were, the heavy lifting. This can be seen more clearly if we distinguish three types of theory from each other.¹

A theory of art is a statement, for any x , of what makes x a work of art. The buck-passers' basic claim, for example, states what makes x a work of art and is thereby a theory of art. More specifically, a theory of art completes, on the right-hand side, the following biconditional:

Theory of art: (For any x) x is a work of art iff, and because, x is . . .

By contrast, a theory of the arts is a statement, for any kind K , of what makes K an art. Such a theory should tell us, for example, what makes sculpture, but not bodybuilding (presumably), an art. More specifically, a theory of the arts completes the following biconditional:

Theory of the arts: (For any kind K) K is an art iff, and because, K is . . .

These two types of theory contrast with a third type: theories of the individual arts. Such theories are statements, one for each art, of what makes x a work of that art. A theory of sculpture, for example, should tell us what makes Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, but not a Tesla Model S (presumably), a work of sculpture. More specifically, theories of the individual arts complete the following biconditional:

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Theories of the individual arts: (For any x and some kind K) x is a work of K iff, and because, x is . . .

Buck-passers are then so called because in completing the biconditional for a theory of art, they pass the buck to theories of the individual arts and/or to a theory of the arts. Importantly, however, this yields *two* different statements with which buck-passers may complete the biconditional for a theory of art, each of which is compatible with the buck-passers' basic claim.

To see that, note buck-passers may be either (what I call) *double-* or *single-*buck-passers, depending on where they pass the buck to. If they pass the buck to theories of the individual arts and to a theory of the arts, requiring both types of theory to be developed, they are double-buck-passers. Such buck-passers complete the biconditional for a theory of art as follows:

Double-buck-passers' (DBP) view: (For any x) x is a work of art iff, and because, (for some kind K) x is a work of K and K is an art.

On the other hand, if buck-passers pass the buck to theories of the individual arts alone, requiring only this type of theory to be developed, they are single-buck-passers. These buck-passers complete the biconditional thus:

Single-buck-passers' (SBP) view: (For any x) x is a work of art iff, and because, x is a work of K_1 or K_2 or K_3 or . . .

where each of K_1, K_2, K_3, \dots , stands for a different art—say, painting, sculpture, and so on.

The DBP view and the SBP view are then different versions of the *buck-passing theory of art*. Is there a strong reason for buck-passers to endorse one version of the theory over the other? Lopes, who has developed and defended the theory, thinks there is, since he thinks the prospects for developing a theory of the arts are not good (Lopes 2014: 107–124). If he is right, it follows that the prospects for developing the DBP view are not good, and so that buck-passers have a strong reason to be single-buck-passers. Accordingly, Lopes's (2014) version of the buck-passing theory is the SBP view.²

In what follows, I argue that the SBP view faces a dilemma, each horn of which leads to trouble (Section 2). Then I consider some strategies for resisting the dilemma and argue that each is problematic (Section 3). Throughout, I remain neutral on Lopes's claim that the prospects for developing a theory of the arts are not good, but I revisit it at the end (Section 4).

2. A DILEMMA

Consider again the SBP view and suppose it is true. Plainly,

(P0) Either

First horn: the disjunction on the right-hand side of the SBP view is open

or

Second horn: the disjunction is closed.

In what follows, I argue that taking either horn leads to trouble:

(P1) If the disjunction is open, then the SBP view is not a theory of art.

(P2) If the disjunction is closed, then we cannot know what a work of art is.

Therefore,

(C) Either the SBP view is not a theory of art or we cannot know what a work of art is.

In Section 2.1, I argue that P1 is true. In Section 2.2, I argue that P2 is true given some plausible claims. In arguing for the latter premise, I explore uncharted territory: the implications of vagueness for theories of art.

2.1. The Argument for P1

The argument for P1 is straightforward:

(P1.1) If the disjunction is open, then the SBP view does *not* complete the biconditional for a theory of art.

(P1.2) If the SBP view does not complete the biconditional for a theory of art, then the SBP view is not a theory of art.

Therefore,

(P1) If the disjunction is open, then the SBP view is not a theory of art.

P1.1 is true because if the disjunction is open, then the SBP view states an incomplete list of (necessary and sufficient³) conditions for being a work of art, and hence does not complete the biconditional for a theory of art. P1.2 is true because it is necessary for a statement to be a theory of art that it completes the relevant biconditional (i.e., that it states a complete list of conditions on the right-hand side).⁴

Why would it be problematic for single-buck-passers who take the first horn to concede that the SBP view is not a theory of art? Because it would be incoherent for them to concede that *and* hold on to the buck-passers' basic claim—according to which, recall, x is a work of art iff, and because, x is a work of (at least) one of the arts—since the basic claim amounts to a theory of art. And if anything is non-negotiable for buck-passers (and something must be), it is the basic claim.

In fact, it would even be problematic for single-buck-passers who take the first horn to concede, as they must, that the SBP view does not complete the biconditional for a theory of art. That is because this would amount to conceding that the SBP view is *trivially* immune to a certain type of counterexample. To begin to see this, note the basic claim entails:

No Free Agents: If x is a work of art, then x is a work of (at least) one of the arts.

To defend No Free Agents, buck-passers must show there is no case such that: x is work of art and a member of some kind, but no kind of which x is a member is an art. With this in mind, note the SBP view entails:

*No Free Agents**: If x is a work of art, then x is a work of K_1 or K_2 or K_3 or . . .

For simplicity's sake, suppose being a work of K_1 , being a work of K_2 and being a work of K_3 are the only conditions for being a work of art on the incomplete list of conditions on the right-hand side of the view.

No Free Agents* is trivially immune to the type of counterexample that, as just explained, would falsify No Free Agents. For consider any case in which x is a work of art and a member of some kind, but not of K_1 , K_2 or K_3 (the kinds that figure in the incomplete list). Since x is a work of art, the antecedent of No Free Agents* is satisfied. But it is trivially impossible to show that *no* kind of which x is a member is an art (i.e., that the consequent of No Free Agents* is false). That is because the SBP view (being a view with an open disjunction) states an incomplete list of conditions for being a work of art and (being the view of *single*-buck-passers) does not tell us what an art is: even if we show that x is not a member of K_1 , K_2 or K_3 , we cannot rule out the possibility that some kind of which x is a member is an art that does not yet figure in the list. So, trivially, no such case could falsify No Free Agents*. This is obviously problematic.

But the problems do not end there. The SBP view also entails:

*Works of an Art Are Art**: If x is a work of K_1 or K_2 or K_3 or . . . , then x is a work of art.

If there is a case in which x is a member of a kind that figures in the incomplete list (say, K_3), but not a work of art, Works of an Art Are Art* is false. So, Works of an Art Are Art* is *not* trivially immune to this type of counterexample. The upshot is that there is a bizarre asymmetry at the heart of

the SBP view: in the left-to-right direction of its biconditional, the view is trivially immune to the type of counterexample introduced earlier; in the other direction, it is not trivially immune to the type of counterexample just introduced. I conclude that the best option for single-buck-passers is to take second horn of the dilemma.

2.2. The Argument for P2

Suppose the disjunction is closed. Then, I shall argue, it follows from the conjunction of three plausible claims that we cannot know what a work of art is. In what follows, I present this argument in three steps, each of which introduces one of those claims.

2.2.1. Step 1

To begin, suppose

(P2.1) The closed-disjunction SBP view is true.

Second, consider the (complete) list of the arts and the (complete) list of the non-arts, and suppose each goes like this (where ‘. . .’ stands for the other *K*s on the relevant list):

<i>The arts</i>	<i>The non-arts</i>
Painting	Car-making
Sculpture	Bodybuilding
Architecture	Snowboarding
.

How many *K*s, exactly, are there on each list? It should be uncontroversial the answer is that it is *vague*—that it is vague how many arts and non-arts there are. Why? Because given how pervasive the phenomenon of vagueness is, it should be uncontroversial that the predicate ‘is an art’ is vague, and so that for some *K*s, it is vague whether these *K*s are arts. Suppose, for example, that gardening is such a *K*.⁵ Moreover, suppose (to simplify) that gardening is the only such *K*. (It is not; other such *K*s may include ice-dancing, tattooing, etc., but let us ignore this for now for simplicity’s sake.) Then we have two *candidate*s for being the list of the arts: on each of them, painting, sculpture, architecture, . . . , are listed, but while gardening is listed on one candidate list, it is not on the other. Since it is vague whether gardening is an art, it is vague whether the former list is the list of the arts, and likewise for the latter list. More generally,

(P2.2) *Vague List of the Arts*: There are several candidate lists of the arts and for any of them, it is vague whether that list is the list of the arts.

According to the closed-disjunction SBP view, being a work of (say) painting is one among several (necessary and sufficient) conditions for being a work of art and there are as many such conditions as there are arts. Together with the claim that it is vague whether gardening is an art (and, to simplify, the only such *K*), the view implies that there are two candidates for being the (complete) *list of conditions for being a work of art*: on each of them, being a work of painting, being a work of sculpture, being a work of architecture, . . . , are listed, but while being a work of gardening is listed on one candidate list, it is not on the other. Since it is vague whether gardening is an art, it is vague whether the former list is the list of conditions for being a work of art, and likewise for the latter list. More generally,

(P2.3) If P2.1 and P2.2, then there are several candidate lists of conditions for being a work of art and for any of them, it is vague whether that list is the list of conditions for being a work of art.

So, the conclusion of Step 1 is that

- (P2.4) There are several candidate lists of conditions for being a work of art and for any of them, it is vague whether that list is the list of conditions for being a work of art.

2.2.2. Step 2

Vague List of the Arts is the first of the three plausible claims. The second is a claim from the literature on vagueness:

- (P2.5) *Vagueness Precludes Knowledge*: (For any p) If it is vague whether p , then we cannot know that p .

This claim is not uncontroversial, but it is plausible and widely held.⁶ In fact, supervenience and epistemicism, arguably the two leading theories of vagueness, entail it. To see this, suppose, for example, that it is vague whether José is tall. According to supervenience, if it is vague whether p , then p is neither true nor false.⁷ Since knowledge implies truth, and it is *not* true that José is tall, it follows from supervenience that we cannot know that José is tall.⁸ On the other hand, according to epistemicism, if it is vague whether p , then p is either true or false but we cannot know its truth-value, since every vague term (e.g., ‘is tall’) draws a sharp boundary (say, between the tall and the non-tall) but we cannot know where this boundary is located.⁹ So, it follows from epistemicism that we cannot know that José is tall, since we cannot know on which side of the boundary he falls, the ‘tall’ side or the ‘non-tall’ side.

Together, P2.4 and Vagueness Precludes Knowledge imply that

- (P2.6) For any candidate list of conditions for being a work of art, we cannot know that that list is the list of conditions for being a work of art.

2.2.3. Step 3

The third plausible claim is the claim that

- (P2.7) *Unable to Know*: If for any candidate list of conditions for being a work of art, we cannot know that that list is the list of conditions for being a work of art, then we cannot know what a work of art is.

Why is this plausible? Consider the closed-disjunction SBP view:

- Closed-disjunction SBP view*: (For any x) x is a work of art iff, and because, x is a work of K_1 or . . . or K_n .

If we can know what a work of art is, then, since the closed-disjunction SBP view is true, we can know the list of conditions for being a work of art as specified by the view on the right-hand side of the biconditional. But if we cannot know, for any candidate list of conditions, that that list is the list of conditions, then we cannot know what a work of art is.

Together, P2.6 and Unable to Know imply that

- (P2.8) We cannot know what a work of art is.

Therefore, given three plausible claims (Vague List of the Arts, Vagueness Precludes Knowledge, and Unable to Know), P2 is true.

2.2.4. We Cannot Know What a Determinate Work of Art Is, Either

Given the vagueness of ‘is an art,’ we can distinguish between those K s which are *determinately* arts, those for which it is *vague* whether they are arts, and those which are determinately *not* arts. Call these K s, respectively, the determinate arts, the vague arts, and the determinate non-arts. With

these distinctions in mind, note the argument for P2.8 does not show that we cannot know what a *determinate* work of art is. However, there is a version of it, just as plausible as the original one, that does. To see this, simply restrict the relevant premises of the argument for P2.8 to the determinate arts and to determinate works of art. For example, here is Vague List of the Arts restricted to the determinate arts:

Vague List of the *Determinate Arts*: There are several candidate lists of the *determinate* arts and for any of them, it is vague whether that list is the list of the *determinate* arts.

Once we do this for the relevant premises, it becomes clear that the restricted versions are just as plausible as the original ones. But it is worth explaining why Vague List of the Determinate Arts in particular is just as plausible as Vague List of the Arts.

Consider the determinate arts, the vague arts and the determinate non-arts, and suppose the list of each goes like this:

<i>The determinate arts</i>	<i>The vague arts</i>	<i>The determinate non-arts</i>
Painting	Gardening	Car-making
Sculpture	Ice-dancing	Bodybuilding
Architecture	Tattooing	Snowboarding
...

How many K s, exactly, are there on each list? The plausible answer is to say it is vague. Why? Earlier, we saw that there is no sharp boundary between the arts and the non-arts or if there is one, as epistemicists hold, its location is unknowable. This is because there are vague arts. That much, as argued, should be uncontroversial. If now we claimed that there is a determinate (i.e., non-vague) number of determinate arts, vague arts and determinate non-arts, what we would be claiming is that there *is* a knowable sharp boundary between the determinate arts and the vague arts, and between the vague arts and the determinate non-arts. But the existence of such a knowable sharp boundary would be just as incredible as the existence of a knowable sharp boundary between the arts and the non-arts! So, plausibly, Vague List of the Determinate Arts holds.

2.2.5. *The SBP View vs. the DBP View*

At this point, one might wonder why the DBP view does not entail, given the plausible claims just introduced, that we cannot know what a work of art is. The reason is that it does not follow from the DBP view and Vague List of the Arts both being true that there are several candidate lists of conditions for being a work of art and that for each it is vague whether that is the list of conditions. Why? Because there is only one candidate list on the DBP view and this remains so if Vague List of the Arts is true: being a work of K and K being an art. Hence, there is *no* vagueness about whether this is the list of conditions.

This contrasts with the closed-disjunction SBP view. On this view together with Vague List of the Arts, as we saw, there are several candidate lists of conditions and for each it is vague whether that is the list. That is because, on the view, there are as many conditions for being a work of art as there are arts and, according to the claim, there are several candidate lists of the arts and for each it is vague whether that is the list.

Another difference between the DBP view and the closed-disjunction SBP view worth bringing out is one that holds regardless of whether Vague List of the Arts is true. On the closed-disjunction SBP view, if we know what a work of art is, we know the (complete) list of the arts. Why? Because if the closed-disjunction SBP view is true, then if we know what a work of art is, we know the disjunctively necessary and individually sufficient conditions—on the right-hand side of the view—for being a work of art: being a work of K_1 , being a work of K_2 , . . . , and being a work of K_n . And if we know this, then, since each of K_1 , . . . , K_n stands for a different art, we know the list of the arts.

By contrast, if the DBP view is true, then if we know what a work of art is, we know the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being a work of art: being a work of K and K being an art. But knowing this is compatible with not knowing the list of the arts.

3. RESISTING THE DILEMMA

Because the best option for single-buck-passers, as argued in Section 2.1, is to take the second horn, they have a few obvious strategies for resisting the dilemma: to deny Vague List of the Arts or Vague List of the Determinate Arts or Unable to Know or Vagueness Precludes Knowledge. However, each is problematic.

Take the first two strategies. To deny Vague List of the Arts is to deny that 'is an art' is vague. But the vagueness of 'is an art' is a datum any version of the buck-passing theory should accommodate, not something that can plausibly be denied. To deny Vague List of the Determinate Arts is to deny that for some K s, it is vague whether it is determinate that these K s are arts—that is, it is to deny that 'is an art' is higher-order vague. But this would commit single-buck-passers either to denying the phenomenon of higher-order vagueness altogether—a very controversial move—or to denying the higher-order vagueness of 'is an art' while upholding the higher-order vagueness of other vague predicates—a seemingly *ad hoc* move.

The third strategy is to deny Unable to Know as follows. Unable to Know assumes that to know what x is requires knowing the list of conditions for being x (when there is a list of conditions for being x). But we know what (say) knowledge is, in some straightforward sense, without knowing the list of conditions for knowledge. Similarly, we know what a work of art is, in some straightforward sense, without knowing the list of conditions for being a work of art.

The problem with this strategy is that we can acknowledge the existence of a straightforward sense in which we know what a work of art is while holding onto Unable to Know. In a low-precision context, such as an everyday context, there might well be a straightforward sense in which we know what a work of art is. But our context is a high-precision one, in which an approach to completing the biconditional for a theory of art is being examined. In this context, we have a theory which states the conditions for being a work of art, but if we cannot know all these conditions, then we cannot know what a work of art is in the sense relevant to the context: what a work of art is *according to the theory*.

One might think, at this point, that the best strategy is to deny Vagueness Precludes Knowledge. This strategy amounts to denying the theories of vagueness that entail Vagueness Precludes Knowledge, among which are supervaluationism and epistemicism, arguably the two leading theories (as discussed in §2.2.2). To some, this would be too high a price to pay to save the SBP view, but set that aside. The problem with the strategy is that a weaker principle than Vagueness Precludes Knowledge, which has been proposed as an alternative to the latter,¹⁰ also leads to trouble. According to this principle,

Vagueness Precludes *Determinate* Knowledge: If it is vague whether p , then we cannot *determinately* know that p .

Together, P2.4 (the conclusion of Step 1), Vagueness Precludes Determinate Knowledge and a weaker version of Unable to Know,

Unable to *Determinately* Know: If for any candidate list of conditions for being a work of art, we cannot *determinately* know that that list is the list of conditions for being a work of art, then we cannot *determinately* know what a work of art is,

imply that

(P2.8*): We cannot *determinately* know what a work of art is.

But P2.8* is hardly an improvement on P2.8.

4. CONCLUSION

Let us take stock. I argued that there are two versions of the buck-passing theory of art, that one of them—the SBP view—faces a dilemma, and that taking either horn of the dilemma leads to trouble. I conclude that if we should be buck-passers at all, we should be double-buck-passers. Recall, however, Lopes's claim that the prospects for developing a theory of the arts are not good, which implies that the DBP view is problematic. Throughout, I remained neutral on this claim. But it is significant that *if* the claim is true, then, given the dilemma, the prospects for developing the buck-passing theory—in any version—are not good. So, in the end, I offered something both to buck-passers and to their opponents. To buck-passers, I offered an argument for being double- rather than single-buck-passers. To their opponents, I offered an argument, conditional on Lopes's claim, against the buck-passing theory.

NOTES

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1. The distinctions are Lopes's (2008, 2014).
2. In earlier work, Lopes does not take a stand on the matter. See Lopes 2008.
3. More specifically, of *disjunctively* necessary and *individually* sufficient conditions.
4. Tellingly, Lopes himself is committed to this argument against taking the first horn, since P1.1 is obviously true, he thinks a statement is a theory of art only if it completes the relevant biconditional (Lopes 2014: 12), and he thinks the buck-passers' view—be it the SBP or the DBP view—is a theory of art (Lopes 2014: 11 *et passim*).
5. If you do not like the example, replace it by your favourite.
6. See Hu n.d. and Hu 2021 for comprehensive discussion.
7. See Fine 1975 and Keefe 2003 for the classic statements.
8. As this argument makes clear, by 'supervaluationism' here I mean *standard* supervaluationism. The argument does not hold given non-standard supervaluationism. See McGee and McLaughlin 1995 for this view.
9. See Williamson 1994 for the classic statement.
10. See, for example, Barnett 2010: 23.

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