

## On Davies' Defence Of The Institutional Definition Of Art

by Graham Oppy

In "A Defence Of The Institutional Definition Of Art" (Southern Journal Of Philosophy (1988), Vol. XXVI, No. 3, pp.317-334), Stephen Davies argues for the view that George Dickie's institutional definition of art can be amended in a way which renders it immune to the sorts of objections which are most commonly supposed to undermine it, but without leaving the definition open to any new and crippling objections. I think that Davies' argument is interesting, but unsuccessful; consequently, the main purpose of this paper is to explain why Davies' attempt to rehabilitate the institutional definition of art fails.

The paper is in six parts. In part I, I (briefly) describe Dickie's institutional definition of art, and enumerate the seven main difficulties which Davies recognises to have been raised in the literature, and which his modified institutional definition purports to be able to overcome. Then, in parts II-V, I argue that Davies' proposed modifications to the institutional definition of art are not successful in meeting some of the objections which he enumerates. Finally, in part VI, I suggest that there may be further objections to Dickie's institutional definition of art which Davies does not consider, and which also pose problems for his own suggestion.

### I

In its earliest incarnation, Dickie's definition of a work of art took the following form:

X is a work of art iff:

- (i) X is an artefact; and
- (ii) A set of the aspects of X has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of the Artworld. (G. Dickie (1974) Art And The Aesthetic, Cornell, p.74)

More recently, in the face of various sorts of criticisms, Dickie has modified his definition of a work of art:

X is a work of art iff:

- (i) X is an artefact; and
- (ii) X is of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.

and he has also provided the following supplementary definitions:

- (iii) A is an artist iff A is a person who participates with understanding in the making of an artwork.
- (iv) P is a public iff P is a set of persons the members of which are prepared in some degree to understand an object which is presented to them.
- (v) AWS is an artworld system iff AWS is a framework for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to an artworld public.

(vi) AW is an artworld iff AW is a totality of artworld systems. (G. Dickie (1984) The Art Circle, New Haven, pp.80-82.)

Since Davies takes it that Dickie's original definition can be defended without moving to the position which Dickie later adopted, I shall henceforth use the term "institutional definition of art" to refer to the original definition given by Dickie, and I shall ignore the fact that Dickie has himself modified that definition. (The difference between the earlier and later versions of the definition do not seem to have any bearing on the criticisms which Davies considers and which he seeks to overcome.)

Some of the points on which Dickie has been attacked are the following:

- (i) his claim that no one is privileged in her ability to confer art-status on objects;
- (ii) his acknowledgement that his definition is circular;
- (iii) his rejection of aesthetic properties;
- (iv) his view that a socially isolated person could not produce art;
- (v) his failure to show that the actions of artists in conferring art-status are rule-governed (as opposed to merely being regular);
- (vi) his insistence on the artefactuality condition;
- (vii) his failure to provide any account of the place and value of art within the life of a community.

It is Davies' view that there is a version of the institutional definition of art on which the problems which have been thought to arise in connection with each of (i)-(vii) can be overcome. The main contention for which Davies argues is that, in Dickie's original definition of a work of art, conferral of art status must be construed as an exercise of authority which is vested in socially defined roles, rather than as a type of action. Moreover -- as a consequence of this main contention -- Davies suggests that more attention must be paid, in Dickie's account, to the definition of an artist. I shall begin with a discussion of the latter contention.

## II

Although Davies' discussion of Dickie's account of artists is not absolutely perspicuous, it seems to be fairly clear that the main point which he wants to make is that -- on an institutional account of art -- there are two different conceptions of an artist which need to be distinguished. On the one hand, an artist<sub>1</sub> is someone within the institutionalised context of the Artworld who can confer art-status on objects. But, on the other hand, an artist<sub>2</sub> is someone who creates objects and events, or specifications for the creation of objects and events.

Given this distinction, the question which Davies addresses is whether Dickie is correct to maintain either of the following claims:

- (a) Each member of the Artworld is an artist.
  
- (b) Each member of the Artworld might be an artist.

-- and, not surprisingly, the answer which he gives is that it depends which of the two possible conceptions of an artist is considered. If (a) and (b) are interpreted as the claims:

(a<sub>1</sub>) Each member of the Artworld is an artist<sub>1</sub>.

(b<sub>1</sub>) Each member of the Artworld might be an artist<sub>1</sub>.

then Davies claims that (a) and (b) are both false; but if (a) and (b) are interpreted as the claims:

(a<sub>2</sub>) Each member of the Artworld is an artist<sub>2</sub>.

(b<sub>2</sub>) Each member of the Artworld might be an artist<sub>2</sub>.

then Davies claims that (a) is false and (b) is true.

In defence of the claim that (b<sub>2</sub>) is true, Davies notes that it seems reasonable to suppose that "anyone might have artistic skills [and] ... anyone might come to qualify for the role of artist" (p.319). Unfortunately, there is an ambiguity in this suggestion -- for, on the one hand, it may be that what Davies wants to claim is:

(b<sub>2a</sub>) For each member of the Artworld in the actual world, there is an alternative possible world in which that person is an artist<sub>2</sub> (though not necessarily the same world for each person);

but on the other hand, it may also be that what Davies wants to claim is:

(b<sub>2b</sub>) There is an alternative possible world in which every member of the Artworld in that world is an artist<sub>2</sub>.

I suspect that Davies would be happy to accept both (b<sub>2a</sub>) and (b<sub>2b</sub>) so that -- in the context of his discussion of (b<sub>2</sub>) -- the (potential) ambiguity is not harmful. But what of his discussion of (b<sub>1</sub>)?

Against (b<sub>1</sub>), Davies argues that: "If just anyone might have the authority to employ successfully all of the conventions by which art-status might be conferred ... then the notion of role-differentiation, on which the institutional theory must rely if it is to be convincing, is deprived of any substance. ... If everyone is equally "authorised" to confer art-status, then the notion of authorisation is empty, as is the claim that such "authority" marks the limits of an institutionally defined role." (p.319)

The first part of this argument might seem to suggest that the claim which Davies wants to argue against is:

(b<sub>1a</sub>) For each member of the Artworld in the actual world, there is an alternative possible world in which that person has the authority to employ all of the conventions by which art-status might be conferred in that world (though not necessarily the same world for each person);

-- but it is clear that nothing which he says counts against this claim. (Moreover, it is hard to see what sort of argument could be given in support of the view that (b<sub>1a</sub>) is false.)

Consequently, it seems to me that the claim which Davies wishes to attack must be the following:

(b<sub>1b</sub>) There is an alternative possible world in which every member of the Artworld in that world has the authority to employ all of the conventions by which art-status might be conferred in that world.

But the question is: Does Davies have a good argument against (b<sub>1b</sub>)?

What Davies claims is that, in a world W in which each member of the Artworld is equally authorised to employ all of the conventions by which art-status might be conferred in that world, the notion of authorisation is empty. However, there is a question about how the notion of authorisation is to be construed in this claim.

On the one hand, if authorisation is merely permission, then this claim is false. Consider the case of a world W<sub>1</sub> in which everyone is permitted to drive. This permission need not be vacuous, since it may well be the case that, in nearby worlds, some of the members of W<sub>1</sub> are not permitted to drive because they have infringed laws which hold in W<sub>1</sub>, and for which the appropriate penalty is a revocation of permission to drive. (In this sense, we can imagine a world W<sub>2</sub> in which everyone is authorised to confer art-status on art-objects, and yet in which the notion of authorisation is not empty: All we need to do is to imagine nearby worlds in which some people have had this authorisation withdrawn, (perhaps) because they have tried to confer art-status on inappropriate objects such as urinals ...)

The point is no doubt obvious: the notion of permission is not rendered vacuous merely because, *in fact*, there is no one who does not have the permission; rather, the notion of permission is rendered vacuous when it is *not possible* for there to be someone who lacks the permission. If authorisation is understood as permission, then Davies' argument against (b<sub>1b</sub>) is unsound.

But, on the other hand, if authorisation is something which can only be possessed by someone who is in a position of authority, then the status of Davies' argument is less clear. Is it possible to have a social institution in which each member is -- in the same respect -- in a position of authority with respect to some or all of the other members? I assume that, if it is to be possible for there to be conflict between different people in such a way that the conflict will be resolved in favour of the person with the greater (or greatest) authority, then it must be the case that authority is hierarchical -- in which case (b<sub>1b</sub>) is false, and Davies has a good argument against it. But then the question is: Is this the sort of conception of authority which is relevant to the notion of authorisation in which Davies is interested?

Surely not. Surely the notion of authorisation which Davies wants is merely that of permission -- i.e. surely it should be no part of the institutional account of art that there are distinguished roles in the Artworld in virtue of the occupation of which some people are privileged in their ability to arbitrate cases in which dispute has arisen over whether to confer art-status on objects. Indeed, Davies himself concedes that this is so: "By "authority" I mean an entitlement successfully to employ the conventions by which art-status is conferred on objects/events. (In particular, I do not mean a right to others' obedience.)" (p.322)

(Davies goes on to add that: "In exercising this authority, the artist acts "on behalf of" the Artworld in the sense that he or she employs the powers vested in the role of artist, and not in the further sense of "speaking for" other members of the Artworld." (p.322) But what sort of power is vested in the role of an artist<sub>1</sub>, if an artist<sub>1</sub> cannot speak for other members of the Artworld? What authority is exercised by one who confers art-status on an object, if no one is thereby obliged to treat that object as a work of art?)

I conclude that Davies' argument is mistaken: It does not follow from the considerations which he adduces that Dickie is wrong to claim that it is a consequence of the best formulation of an institutional definition of art that no one is privileged in her ability to confer art-status on objects. Of course, this is not to say that Dickie's view that no one is privileged in her ability to confer art-status on objects is unobjectionable. However, it does seem to me that, *if* we accept that there is a distinct role in the Artworld for those who confer art-status upon objects, *then* it is hard to see that there is any good reason to say that it could not be the case that everyone fills this role. (The antecedent of this conditional claim is, of course, not uncontroversial. It might well be disputed that anyone other than the artist<sub>2</sub> who creates a given work of art can bestow art-status on that object -- and it might also be disputed that there is any act of bestowal of art-status upon objects which can be distinguished from the work of an artist<sub>2</sub> upon those objects -- and, moreover, it might well be said that what is controversial about Dickie's claim that anyone might be an artist is simply that it invokes non-existent social roles. However, I do not propose to take up these issues here.)

In concluding this section of the paper, I should also point out that there are further objections which could have been raised against Davies' argument. I shall mention two.

(i) I take it that another institutionally defined role in the Artworld is that of spectator or consumer (of artworks). However, while it is clear that it can't be the case that everyone fills all of these roles all of the time, there is no problem with the view that everyone fills each of these roles some of the time. In any show, there can only be one prima donna -- but this does not mean that it could not be the case that every one is a prima donna. Even if the Artworld must have a hierarchical structure of authorisation to confer art-status on objects, it does not follow that some people must never have that authority.

(ii) Davies is very interested in Duchamp's urinal. In particular, Davies claims that a urinal salesman could not have conferred art-status on one of his urinals in the way in which Duchamp was able to do because he would not have occupied an appropriate place in the Artworld (and so would not have had the requisite authority). I can see no reason why a urinal salesman could not have done what Duchamp did -- except for the (contingent) fact that Duchamp's status as an avant-garde artist gave his actions an "authority" (in the sense of a "right" to the serious regard of others!) which the urinal salesman's actions would have lacked. If a urinal salesman had tried to enter one of his urinals (complete with signature) in the art exhibition at which Duchamp's *Fountain* was exhibited, then his urinal would have been just as much (or just as little) a work of art as was Duchamp's -- and this is true whether or not it is the case that no gallery would ever have consented to an exhibition of the salesman's urinal.

Despite these observations, there is a related claim which does deserve to be taken seriously. *If* we accept the controversial assumption that *Fountain* is a work of art, *then* it is clear that it could not be the case that there is an Artworld in which there are only works of art like *Fountain*. That is, there is a sense in which it could not be the case that everyone did what Duchamp did -- namely, it could not be the case that everyone only ever produced art which was nothing more than a slap in the face of the Artworld. For, in those circumstances, there would be no Artworld. But, of course, this true claim lends no support to the view that there are necessary institutional reasons which would have debarred the urinal salesman from doing what Duchamp did.

The second point which I wish to take up concerns Davies' discussion of the question whether a socially isolated person could produce art. In the way that this question is usually raised, the issue is taken to be, not whether someone -- e.g. Robinson Crusoe -- who happens to be isolated from an Artworld with which s/he had prior links could produce art, but rather whether someone who had no familiarity with social life in general -- e.g. a feral child or a lone Stone Age cave-dweller -- could produce art.

As Davies notes, if we are prepared to accept that a socially isolated person could have some concepts, then it seems implausible to argue -- as Dickie does -- that such a person could not form a conception of an Artworld and hence could not produce art (since she could have no conception of her products as artworks). Consequently, Davies suggests that an emphasis on role-differentiation and a care not to equate the individual with any role that she happens to fill might be used to support the conclusion that a socially isolated person can produce works of art: "A single person might fill a number of roles within a single institution, including the various roles of artist, impresario, critic, curator, audience, and so on which would together constitute an Artworld, despite the absence of a social context provided by the presence of other people. That is to say, social isolation need not count against the creation of the institutional context upon which depends, according to Dickie's theory, the creation of artworks." (p.325) However, I do not think that this proposal is satisfactory.

One potential problem is that, on Davies' account, it is not clear that it is possible for one person to create an Artworld. According to Davies, an Artworld is an informal institution which is structured in terms of various roles -- mentioned above -- and the relationships between them; moreover, within the wider institution there are formally structured elements -- theatres, galleries, ministries of the arts, and so forth. Surely it would be asking rather a lot for one person to maintain an institutional structure of this sort.

(It would be insane for a Robinson Crusoe to proclaim himself Minister of the Arts for his island. However, perhaps it is not an essential feature of an Artworld that it should have a Minister of the Arts. There is an important point here: Institutional theories tend to have a lot to say about what the Artworld in the actual world is like, but a lot less to say about the (minimum) conditions which must be satisfied by an informal institutional structure IS in a world W in order that IS will be an artworld in W. But the claim which institutionalists want to defend is that art is essentially institutional -- and so there is at least *prima facie* reason for expecting that an institutionalist ought to be very interested in the (minimum) conditions which must be satisfied in order that an informal institutional structure can be an artworld.)

Another potential problem is that it may be the case that the lower bound on the number of people who must belong to an institutional structure which can accommodate the roles of impresario, public, curator, and critic, is greater than one. (The same may be true of the role of performer, too.) Consider the case of the role of the critic. It is true that it is possible to engage in self-criticism -- and so it is true that a socially isolated artist could engage in bouts of self-criticism -- but it is not nearly so clear that someone who addressed the works of no one other than herself could be an art critic. (Can there be criticism in the absence of location of an oeuvre in a genre, and in the absence of comparisons between one oeuvre and another?) I do not say that there is an unanswerable objection to Davies' claim here -- but there is certainly a question which demands further investigation. (Some further questions: Is every poet who collects her poems in a scrapbook a curator? an impresario? Is a poet who rereads her own poems, but who never shows them to anyone else, a public for her poetry? Is a poet who revises her poems thereby a critic?)

However, the main problem which I see for Davies' discussion of the socially isolated artist is that it does not address the fundamental point of the objection. The important question is not, whether a socially isolated person could produce works of art, but rather whether a person existing outside an Artworld framework could produce works of art. And the challenge to institutional theories which is generated by this question is that it doesn't seem to be too hard to imagine a situation in which someone does produce works of art outside any Artworld framework. In order to meet this objection, Davies would have to show, not merely that one person could create and fill all of the roles which are constitutive of an Artworld, but that it is not possible for an "isolated" person to fill one or more of these roles without filling all of them. But there is nothing in Davies' article which indicates how the latter conclusion could be established -- and so I conclude that Davies' interpretation of the notion of art-status conferral does not help at all with the real problem that is raised by (iv).

(An example of the sort of case which I have in mind, when I suggest that it seems to be fairly easy to imagine cases in which art is produced outside the context of any artworld, is provided by Jerrold Levinson: "Consider a solitary Indian along the Amazon, who steals off from his non-artistic tribe to arrange coloured stones in a clearing, not outwardly investing them with special position in the world. Might not this be art (and, note, before any future curator decides that it is)?" (J. Levinson (1979) "Defining Art Historically" BJA, p.233) It seems to me that this example could be strengthened by adding a story about how an artworld develops from the activities of this Indian -- for then we are given more reason to suppose that the product of his activity is indeed art. Moreover, there is an important point in extending the story in this way -- for an opponent of the institutional theory can concede that one is very unlikely to find art where there is no artworld without conceding that the existence of an artworld is essential for the production of works of art.)

The third point which I wish to take up concerns Davies' claim that his interpretation of the notion of conferral of art-status allows his version of the institutional definition of art to escape the charge -- levelled at Dickie's version of the theory -- that it cannot show that the action of conferring art-status is rule-governed (rather than merely regular). This is a serious problem for Dickie for, if the action of conferring art-status is merely claimed to be regular, then the institutional theory says no more than that art is a social practice which may only be contingently institutionalised. (As Weiland observes -- in "Can There Be An Institutional Theory Of Art?" JAAC (1981) -- social practices such as waving goodbye do not entail the existence of structured institutions "on behalf of" which one might act.) However, I do not think that Davies provides a convincing defence of the view that art is nominally institutional (i.e. of the view that the action of conferring art-status is rule-governed).

According to Davies, Dickie makes a mistake in acquiescing in the suggestion that one cannot act on behalf of an informal institution. For -- according to Davies -- if an informal institution is structured in terms of distinct roles which carry different authorities with them, then a person can act on behalf of the institution in virtue of her occupation of a position in the institutional structure.

However, it seems to me that even if one concedes that a person can act on behalf of an informal institution in virtue of her occupation of a position in the institutional structure -- a claim which remains to be investigated -- it is not at all plausible to suppose that the Artworld is so structured that there is a position reserved for conferrers of art status which is such that occupiers of this role act on behalf of the Artworld in conferring art status on objects. For -- to repeat the claim which I made earlier -- it seems to me that either each member of the Artworld will have no more and no less power, to present objects for

aesthetic appreciation to other members of the Artworld, than any other member (in which case the suggestion that this power is derived from differential position in an institutional structure will be undermined); or else that there must be some members of the Artworld who are specially empowered to decide what is and what is not a work of art, and who command a right to the obedience of others (in which case the suggestion is surely implausible).

In fact -- to turn to an investigation of the claim that a person can act on behalf of an informal institution in virtue of her position in that institutional structure -- it seems to me that the fundamental root of Davies' failure to recognise the dilemma described in the previous paragraph is his failure to distinguish between the sorts of powers which can accrue to a person in virtue of her occupation of a position in an informal institutional structure. As I see it, there are only two sorts of powers which could accrue to a person in virtue of her occupation of a position in an informal institutional structure, viz: (i) the sorts of powers which command a right to the obedience of others; and (ii) the sorts of powers which provide one with a licence for certain sorts of actions. But the first sorts of powers are certainly not the sorts of powers which Davies wishes to ascribe to conferrers of art status; and the second sorts of powers surely could be available in equal measure to all members of the Artworld (in which case the claim, that acts of art-status-conferral are governed by rules which advert to differential position in the institutional structure of the Artworld, is overthrown).

I conclude that Davies' attempt to provide a reply to (v) fails: it remains to be shown that there is a plausible account of the institutional structure of the Artworld in which the action of conferral of art-status turns out to be rule-governed (in the sense required by the theory).

The fourth point which I wish to take up concerns Davies' defence of the fact that institutional definitions of art rest upon a denial of the claim that the definition of art must refer to the place and value and function of art within human life and culture. Davies notes that institutional definitions have this property, but argues that one must beg the question if one wants to urge this as a reason for rejecting them.

According to Davies, there is a distinction to be made between (a) definitions which need to take account of the point of the concept which is being defined, and (b) definitions which do not need to take account of the point of the concept which is being defined. As a general example of concepts which fall under (b), Davies suggests that some concepts are such that they must be defined in terms of procedures -- and, as particular cases, he cites the notions of property and knighthood: "Who owns what is defined in procedural terms, rather than in terms of the consequences of granting rights over goods which give point to such procedures. Thus it is that the rich might (really) own so much as to make it impossible for the poor to experience the benefits of property, even though the procedures for acquiring and transferring proprietorial rights over goods were once chosen, or once evolved, with the point (let us suppose) of providing each person in the community in which those procedures apply with secure access to a share of that which they need to meet their basic needs. Similarly, it is procedures which define who (really) has or has not a knighthood, even though the original point of conferring knighthoods has long since ceased to have social relevance." (p.330)

However, it seems to me that Davies' discussion of these particular cases is confused.

Consider the case of knighthood. As Davies correctly observes, an accurate answer to the question: *Who actually has a knighthood?* can only be obtained from an investigation of the

question: *Who has actually undergone the procedure by which knighthoods are (correctly) conferred?* -- for all and only those people who actually undergo the procedure by which knighthoods are (correctly) conferred are actually knights. However, it does not follow from this that knighthood can only be defined in terms of the procedures (and nothing but the procedures) by which knighthoods are actually (and correctly) conferred. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that the procedure by which knighthood is actually conferred is this: The reigning monarch, of the country of which the person P who is in the process of becoming a knight is a citizen, taps P on the left shoulder with a sword and says "Arise, Sir Knight". Then the question is, whether the following definition is correct:

Knighthood =<sub>df</sub> that property which is conferred on a person X when the reigning monarch of the country of which X is a citizen taps X on the left shoulder with a sword and says "Arise, Sir Knight".

(Strictly, there will also need to be a further clause, viz: that no defeating conditions arise; however, I do not want to discuss this clause yet.)

There are several reasons for thinking that this definition is inadequate.

Most importantly, the inadequacy of this definition can be shown by consideration of a society S in which this very procedure is used to confer a property which one would be reluctant to call "knighthood". Suppose that, in S, the reigning monarch has a rather ironic sense of humour. When internal enemies of the state are about to be executed, the monarch visits them in their cells, and performs the following little ceremony: he taps them on the left shoulder with a sword, and says "Arise, Sir Knight". The traitors are then taken away and fed to the monarch's pet sharks. (These are the only circumstances in which this monarch performs this ceremony. In the neighbouring state S\* -- which the traitors serve --

there is a similar ceremony which is performed by its monarch, as a sign of recognition of service, by the citizens of S\*, of S\*.)

The point is no doubt clear. The procedural definition of knighthood which Davies proposes does tell you who is actually a knight, but -- to someone ignorant of the purpose of the ceremony -- it does not say anything else about what a knight is. If it did tell you everything there is to know about what a knight is, then the reigning monarch of S would be conferring a knighthood on those traitors whom he is about to put to death. But it is obvious, I think, that he does no such thing.

(For what it's worth, my dictionary provides evidence to support the claim that adequate definitions of knighthood do make reference to more than the procedure by which knighthoods are actually conferred. Here is part of what it says about the word "knight":

1 (a) (i) a mounted man-at-arms of the European period serving a king or other superior, usually in return for a tenure of land (esp. a man ceremonially inducted by a feudal superior into special military rank commonly immediately below that of baron, usually available only after completing regular periods of service as a page or squire)

(ii) a man upon whom a corresponding dignity has been conferred by a sovereign in recognition of personal merit.

The important point is that, even now, a knighthood is an honour which is conferred in recognition of personal merit. Any ceremony which confers the title knight, but which lacks the feature that this conferral is an honour in recognition of personal merit (whether

or not there is actually any personal merit there to be recognised!) is just that: a conferral of knighthood in name only.)

Now, to this, it might be objected that the reigning monarch of S does not succeed in conferring a knighthood on the traitors whom he mocks because he does not have the appropriate intentions -- and, in particular, because he does not intend to make these people knights. However, on either of the possible construals of this objection, it does not succeed. On the one hand, if "having the appropriate intentions" is taken to mean having the intention to make these people knights (i.e. having the intention to confer an honour which recognises personal merit) then, of course, the objection defeats the point of the procedural definition. But, on the other hand, if "having the appropriate intentions" just means that the reigning monarch does not have his fingers crossed behind his back (i.e. that there are no defeating conditions, defined or definable solely in procedural terms, which obtain) then the objection is irrelevant -- for it was no part of the story about the state S that the reigning monarch had his fingers crossed behind his back.

To summarise this discussion: Davies is wrong to think that knighthood can be defined in purely procedural terms, even though he is right to think that the answer to the question: *Who actually has a knighthood in world W?* can only be obtained by investigation of the question: *Who has undergone the procedure by which knighthoods are conferred in world W?* A correct definition of knighthood will make no mention of the actual procedure by which knighthoods are conferred; rather, it will advert to the fact that a knighthood is an honour conferred in recognition of personal merit according to some standard procedure (where it is understood that the details of the procedure vary from one world to the next, and indeed, from one country to the next).

(It is perhaps worth pointing out that Davies' account of property is, if anything, even worse. For what he says does not support the view that property can be defined in purely procedural terms; rather, it supports the view that property can be defined without reference to the notion of a fair distribution of property. But this, perfectly reasonable, claim has no bearing on the fact that property cannot be defined without reference to the notion that "procedures which determine who owns what" are the procedures which determine who has the right to possess, enjoy, and dispose of things.)

Now, of course, the above argument does not show that there is no basis to the distinction between definitions which do, and definitions which do not, need to take account of the point of the concept which is being defined. It may be that there is some other way -- apart from invoking procedural definitions -- in which we can make sense of the idea that there are definitions which do not need to take account of the point of the concepts which are being defined. However, I cannot imagine what these other methods might be. Moreover, it seems intuitively clear that the concept of art is in the same class as the concept of knighthood -- i.e. that there is really no room for doubting the claim that the definition of art must make some reference to the point and value and function of art in human life. (I hope to take up this question again on another occasion.)

## VI

So far, I have argued that Davies does not have an adequate reply to criticisms (iv), (v), and (vii) from the list of criticisms which he acknowledges to bear some weight against Dickie's original institutional definition of art. Moreover, it follows from my earlier arguments that he also does not have an adequate reply to (ii) -- i.e. to the objection that Dickie's definitions are circular -- since his response to this objection also relies on his problematic proposal for the construal of the notion of the conferral of art-status.

However, I think that it is also worth pointing out that there are further objections to institutional definitions of art (including Davies' own proposal) which are not mentioned on Davies' list. I shall discuss one such objection here.

In Languages Of Art, Nelson Goodman notes that one of the chief problems facing those who try to frame a definition of art is that most art is bad. (Perhaps Goodman's claim is not quite right. I suspect that it is more accurate to say that most art is mediocre; the bad, like the good, comes along infrequently. Few poets have rivalled McGonagal .... This point makes no difference to the substance of the conclusions which Goodman wishes to draw.) It seems to me that this observation poses an acute difficulty for institutional definitions of art.

It is obvious that institutional accounts of art are geared towards successful works of art. Given Davies' contention that conferral of art status is an exercise of authority which is vested in socially defined roles, there is something very odd in the idea that, most of the time, most of the people who occupy these roles confer art-status on objects which are bad or mediocre works of art. Why do they bother? There are lots of works of art which are terrible -- but surely it would have been easier to ignore them, rather than to go to all of the trouble of baptising them into the world of art ...

Consider an artist X who makes several attempts at a painting. Suppose that X is a marvel at execution, but not very good at composition. Each time that he starts out to make the painting, he has a very clear idea of what the final product will look like -- but, each time, after he has performed only a few brush strokes, he realises that the clear idea which he has is a clear idea of a dreadful painting! (By hypothesis, the realisation is independent of the brush strokes which he makes -- it is the contemplation of his clear idea which leads to the

realisation of the worthlessness of the intended product.) Nonetheless, out of sheer bloody-mindedness, X forces himself to finish each canvas, as a punishment for his compositional failure -- and then he destroys the canvas in a fit of rage.

Up until the time at which X realises that the idea upon which he is working will lead to a terrible painting, he does intend to produce a work upon which art-status will be conferred. However, it does not seem to be correct to say that, at that time, art-status has already been conferred. (Otherwise, it seems that we would quickly be forced to the absurd conclusion that, at the moment at which a bare canvas is created in a factory, it is already a work of art -- since it is produced with the intention that, at some later time, and after it has undergone certain modifications, it will have art-status conferred upon it.)

However, after the time at which X realises that his idea is an idea of a terrible painting, there seems to be no sense in which X confers the status of candidate for appreciation on it -- after all, it is thereafter X's intention that no-one shall contemplate it and that he shall soon destroy it -- and nor does there really seem to be any other sense in which X acts on behalf of the Artworld in conferring the status of art-work upon his painting. So it seems that -- contrary to my intuition -- the institutional theory will lead to the conclusion that X is not producing works of art.

To this argument, it might perhaps be objected that the activity of carrying out the painting constitutes the conferral of art-status upon the work. But, in this case, there is no separable action which counts as the conferral of art-status upon the work. Consequently, we seem to be forced to the view that there are independently identifiable features which are constitutive of those acts which lead to the production of works of art -- and hence we seem to be forced to a view which undercuts the institutional definition. After all, what we now

seem to have been reduced to is the claim that art-status is (or at least can be) conferred by the actions of someone who produces a work of art ...!

Perhaps there is some further reply to this argument which can be made on behalf of proponents of institutional definitions of art. However, I do not propose to consider this question further.

## VII

Given the criticisms which I have made of (Davies' version of) the institutional account of art, it seems to me that there is not much chance that any such account can be made to work. The next step is thus to find a workable alternative. I hope to take up this question in a subsequent work.

Department of Traditional and Modern  
Philosophy,  
University of Sydney

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