

Evaluative And Classificatory Uses Of The Expression “Work Of Art”

It is a commonplace of recent work in aesthetics to distinguish between evaluative and (merely) classificatory uses of instances of the expression “x is a work of art”. On the one hand, instances of this expression can be used to praise particular objects, i.e. to say of them that they have (considerable) aesthetic merit. But, on the other hand, instances of this expression can be used merely to make the observation that certain objects belong to the wider class of works of art, without making any further commitment to the aesthetic merit (or lack thereof) of those objects.

This distinction seems evidently correct. Nonetheless, a number of aestheticians have claimed to find fault with it.

Very famously, R. G. Collingwood’s claim (in The Principles Of Art, OUP, 1982, p.280) that:

The definition of any given kind of thing is also the definition of a good thing of that kind: for a thing that is good in its kind is only a thing which possesses the attributes of that kind.

seems to entail (i) that there cannot be bad works of art; and (ii) that, in saying that something is a work of art, one must thereby be committed to the further claim that the thing in question is a good work of art (and hence, at least indirectly, that one must be praising it). Of course, Collingwood reserves a use for the expression “bad work of art” -- and, indeed, a use which is distinct from the use of the expression “art falsely so-called” -- but it is quite clear that he holds that those things which are properly called “bad works of art” are really failed attempts at works of art, and hence (strictly speaking) not works of art at all.

Cyril Barrett (in “Are Bad Works Of Art ‘Works Of Art’?”, pp.182-193) defends what he claims is the more cautious thesis that apparently (merely) classificatory uses of instances of the expression “x is a work of art” are (to use his term) *crypto-honorific*. According to Barrett a term is crypto-honorific if, among its defining characteristics, there is one or more which commit any user of that term to a favourable judgement of any object which falls under the term, as a member of its kind, on pain of contradiction. Consequently, Barrett’s view is that, in using an instance of the expression “x is a work of art”, one is committed to the making of a favourable judgement about the object in question. However, Barrett differs from Collingwood in holding that one need not be committed to the making of an *overall* favourable judgement in using an instance of the expression “x is a work of art”. On Barrett’s view, a bad work of art is a work of art in which the defects outweigh the merits, but in which some of the possible merits of a work of art are present.

The views defended by Collingwood and Barrett conflict with my intuitions about our use of instances of the expression “x is a work of art”. It seems to me that we are quite prepared to say that something is a work of art, and yet to hold that it is utterly without artistic merit. Consider, for example, the poems of William McGonagall. These poems are almost indescribably bad: McGonagall had no sense of rhythm or rhyme, and no feeling for words. Nonetheless, McGonagall’s poems are recognisably works of art, simply because they are recognisably very bad poems. (Note that it is no

objection to say that McGonagall's poems are quite fascinating in their awfulness, and hence that they possess aesthetic or artistic merit. The point is that the *only* interest which McGonagall's poems have is that they are so very bad; and this does not entail that they thereby have some positive merit after all.)

Despite the considerations just outlined, the sort of view defended by Collingwood and Barrett has found recent adherents. In particular, M. W. Rowe, in "Why 'Art' Doesn't Have Two Senses" (British Journal Of Aesthetics, Vol.31, No.3, July 1991, pp.214-221) defends a view which is quite similar to the view defended by Barrett. Rowe's main claims are: (i) that there can be no classificatory sense of the word 'art'; and (ii) that the fact that there can be no classificatory sense of the word 'art' reveals that recent attempts to define the expression 'work of art' without making any reference to the value of art are doomed to fail.

I think that Rowe is right to insist that a definition of the expression 'art' will need to accord an important role to the notion of the value of works of art. However, I do not think that one needs to deny that there is a non-derivative classificatory sense of the expression "work of art" in order to defend that claim. The purpose of my paper is to explain how the previous two remarks can sit comfortably together.

The rest of my paper proceeds as follows. In section I, I set out Rowe's main argument for the claim that there can be no classificatory sense of the word "art", and then I explain why this argument fails. In section II, I explain how it is nonetheless possible to hold the view that an adequate definition of art must give a central role to the notion of the value of works of art. Finally, in section III, I make a few further remarks about the likely shape of an adequate definition of art.

I

Rowe's main argument against the possibility of a classificatory use for the expression "work of art" begins with a tripartite classification of common nouns into the following classes:

(i) common nouns which are "functionally defined" -- i.e. defined wholly or partly in terms of a function (e.g. "doorstop", "tin-opener", "knife", "pen", "chair", "meal", "weed", "mathematician");

(ii) common nouns which are not functionally defined, but whose referents have either one or a limited number of socially acknowledged functions (e.g. "coal", "apple", "mule");

(iii) common nouns which are not functionally defined, and whose referents do not have socially acknowledged functions (e.g. "wire-worm", "rock", "fluff", "crumb").

Rowe's argument then proceeds in two parts. First, he argues that "art" and "work of art" belong neither to (ii) nor to (iii), and hence that they must belong to (i). And, second, he argues that in the case of terms which belong to (i), there can be no merely classificatory use of such terms. Both parts of this argument are suspect.

The first part of the argument is suspect because Rowe provides no reason to suppose that his tripartite division of common nouns is exhaustive. Moreover, one doesn't need to search too far to find common nouns which seem to fit none of Rowe's categories. Consider the common noun "person". (Other examples are: "nation", "child".)

Rowe's test for membership in (iii) is that, if someone started to talk about "good F's", then, unless the context made it obvious, we should not understand what they meant until they specified what they wanted their F's *for* or *as* (cf. p.216). It seems clear that "person" fails this test: we don't need special contexts to provide a clear meaning for the expression "good person", especially not ones which specify what persons are good for. (Nor do we suppose that persons do not have socially acknowledged functions -- cf. the definition given earlier!)

Rowe's test for membership in (ii) is that there is a single purpose of evaluation which will be assumed, other things being equal, whenever anyone speaks about "good F's". ("Good apple" is always taken to mean "good for eating" or "good as food".) It seems clear that "person" fails this test: for what plausible single purpose of evaluation can be offered in this case? Of course, "good person" means "good as a person" -- but to admit "person" to (ii) on this ground would then require that every common noun belongs to (ii). (Again, it should also be noted that we do not suppose that persons have a single socially acknowledged function or a small number of socially acknowledged functions -- cf. Rowe's earlier definition!)

Rowe's test for membership in (i) is that the term can be defined wholly or partly in terms of a function, i.e. in terms of the value brought about by the relation of the object to us. But it seems most implausible to suppose that "person" has that sort of instrumental definition. (I can hear Kant turning in his grave.)

Consequently, I conclude that Rowe's tripartite system of classification of common nouns is not exhaustive. Moreover, I suggest that it is not implausible to suppose that "art" and "work of art" have similar semantic properties to "person" -- i.e. I suggest that the fact that terms such as "person" do not fit anywhere in Rowe's system of classification does provide reason for doubting whether "art" and "work of art" belong to (i). However, even if we overlook this difficulty, there is a further objection to Rowe's argument which remains to be considered.

Recall that the second part of Rowe's case relies on the claim that there can be no merely classificatory use of terms which belong to (i). His main argument for this claim is the following:

What the referents of this class are good for is already contained in their definitions. Thus, if I say, "This is a good tin-opener" then I will be taken to mean that the object in question is good for opening tins or good as a tin-opener; if I want to recommend it for some other purpose that I will be obliged to add, "...for stopping doors", or "...as a doorstop". From this it follows that an object must live up to a certain standard if it is to be called a tin-opener at all. ... All that 'good' placed in the attributive position does is enhance the evaluative component contained implicitly in the word or explicitly in the definition" (p.215).

There are at least three reasons why we should not be persuaded by this argument.

The first point to notice is that, even in the case of artefacts which are defined in terms of a single function, the evaluation of those artefacts can proceed along many distinct lines (not all of which need to be at all relevant to the present or continued ability of the artefacts to perform those functions). Consider tin-openers. If Choice magazine were to do a survey of tin-openers, it would almost certainly rate them along all of the following dimensions: price, strength, durability, resistance to rust, ease of operation, safety of operation, energy-efficiency. Moreover, it might well rate some tin-openers poorly even though those tin-openers can be used perfectly well to remove the lids from tins. (Consider, for example, a tin-opener which always removes the lid from the tin perfectly well, but which often also removes a few fingers from the hand of the person who operates it!) So: it is not true that a tin-opener is good just because it is good at removing the lids from tins -- even though it is true, by definition, that a good tin-opener will be good at removing lids from tins.

The second point to notice is that Rowe's argument involves a *non-sequitur*. Even if it were true that the properties of a good tin-opener could be deduced from the definition of a tin-opener, it would not follow that an object must live up to a certain standard in order to be a tin-opener at all. To suppose that it would follow is just to beg the question about the nature of the definition under scrutiny. (I shall return to this point in the next section of the paper.)

The third point is that Rowe's argument has the utterly counter-intuitive consequence that (e.g.) broken tin-openers are not (properly speaking) tin-openers. Suppose that I buy a tin-opener, use it for a while, break it, and then repair it. How many tin-openers have I owned? According to Rowe, it seems that the answer must be at least two, since he holds that a broken tin-opener is no tin-opener at all. At the very least, he owes us some story about how the later tin-opener gets to be identified with the earlier one (a story which, I suggest, is most plausibly filled out through the concession that really there was just one tin-opener all along!).

Rowe does have a further argument, for the claim that there can be no merely classificatory use of the terms in (i), which addresses the third point just made:

Would-be tin-openers, things intended as tin-openers, broken tin-openers, etc. can only be tin-openers in a secondary or derivative sense. ... A tin-opener is something one can intend to make. If we take the sentence "I intend to make [a tin-opener]" then it should be possible, even though it is an opaque context, to substitute the definition for the thing defined. "I intend to make [an object to open tins]" is perfectly intelligible, whereas "I intend to make [an object intended to open tins]" is not -- one can only make it so by ignoring "intended". The reason it is unintelligible is that an intention must have a goal or point ... but it is not at all clear what it would be to fail in making an object intended to open tins. (p.215)

Again, there are several objections to this argument.

First, this argument conflates categories which ought to be kept distinct. Would-be tin-openers definitely are not tin-openers; broken tin-openers definitely are tin-openers; and things intended as tin-openers may be tin-openers and may not be tin-openers.

Second, there is good reason to suppose that substitution of definitional equivalences in opaque contexts will not preserve truth value. It often happens that one knows the meaning of a term without being able to explicitly formulate the definition of that term. In such circumstances, the term and its definition will not be intersubstitutable in opaque contexts. (Suppose, for the sake of example, the “cat” is defined by “creature with such-and-such genetic make-up”. Consider four-year old Johnny. On the relevant opaque readings, it may be true that Johnny intends to pat this cat, yet false that Johnny intend to pat this creature with such-and-such genetic makeup. To suppose otherwise, one would need to confuse the opaque and transparent readings of the relevant sentences.)

Third, I don’t see why “I intend to make [an object intended to open tins]” can’t be given a perfectly straightforward interpretation. Rowe’s problem is that he doesn’t understand what it would be to intend to make an object which is intended to open tins. Well, if I intend that the object will open tins, and if I also intend to make the object, then I intend to make an object that will open tins. So, instead of being unintelligible, the formulation merely refers to an unnecessarily complicated intention. (Note that I have read “an object intended to open tins” as “an object intended by its maker(s) to open tins”. This is obviously legitimate: for otherwise, Rowe’s point can be seen to be generated just by well-known difficulties involving the substitution of expressions which contain pronouns.)

So, Rowe’s further argument fails: he has not managed to show that there is an evaluative component which is contained either implicitly in the terms in (i) or else explicitly in their definitions. Moreover, I think that the arguments in this section show quite clearly that the sort of argument which Rowe tries to run is bound to have unwelcome semantic and metaphysical commitments. If we are to discover an evaluative component in the definition of “art” and “work of art”, we shall need to pursue a different strategy.

II

It is not obvious that it is plausible to suppose that “art” and “work of art” are terms which can be given functional definitions. However, for the purposes of this section of my paper, I want to set such worries aside, and to suppose that a functional definition of “art” and “work of art” can be constructed. The question which I then want to investigate is: what would such definitions be like?

Rowe suggests (at least implicitly) that the following is an adequate functional definition of art: “A work of art is an object of sight, hearing, or -- to a lesser extent -- touch , created in order to hold the interest of an audience.” (p.217) Thus, Rowe suggests that the function of works of art is to serve as objects of “disinterested aesthetic contemplation in the widest sense”. (p.217) However, it is obvious that there are many objects which serve this function yet which are not works of art. (The screen-saver on my computer is a good example. I overheard one student say to another that she could spend hours looking at this screen-saver (thereby engaging in an activity which is surely “aesthetic contemplation in the widest sense”). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that neither the screen-saver programme nor its physical manifestation is a work of art.) Moreover, it is not clear that there is any

non-circular way of specifying what is to count as “aesthetic contemplation”. (It seems clear that “contemplation appropriate to works of art” will not do. But it is not clear that there is a satisfactory alternative.) And, finally, it seems clearly wrong to suppose that the creator of a work of art must explicitly intend that the work will serve as an object of disinterested contemplation in the widest sense. (Perhaps some art is created without the intention that it will ever be disinterestedly contemplated by anyone. A writer like Kafka might have written without intending that anyone should read his work; and, indeed, perhaps even intending that no-one should ever read his work. And, in any case, it doesn't seem to be too hard to imagine cases in which art is created in the absence of any intentions concerning the future disinterested contemplation of the work.)

But perhaps some of these worries can be met.. The crucial question concerns the best way to interpret the claim that a work of art is created *in order to* hold the interest of an audience. On the one hand, the problem about the screen-saver suggests that it won't be correct to suppose that anything which actually performs the function of holding the interest of an audience is thereby a work of art. And, on the other hand, the problem about absent intentions suggests that it won't be correct to suppose that anything which is intended to perform the function of holding the interest of an audience is thereby a work of art. But is there any other way of interpreting the definition?

Some recent work in philosophy of biology makes use of the the notion of the “proper functions” of artifacts and biological entities. Very roughly, the proper function of an artifact is the function which it perform when it is working properly, and the proper function of a biological organ is the function which it performs in properly contributing to the healthy functioning of the entire animal. Moreover, in most cases, the proper functions are precisely those functions upon which the continued use or reproduction or survival of the entities in questions has depended. (The proper function of the heart is to pump the blood; and the reason why given animals have hearts is precisely because of their genetic inheritance from ancestors in whom the proper functioning of hearts promoted evolutionary success. The proper function of tin-openers is to open tins; and the reason why we have the kinds of tin-openers which we do is -- at least in large part -- because those kinds of things have proved to be very suited to the task of opening tins.)

One crucial feature of the notion of a proper function is that an entity can have a proper function even when it is not able to carry out that function. A heart in which the main arteries have been blocked by fatty deposits is no longer able to perform its proper function. But, of course, that does not mean that it is no longer a heart. (We have heart-attacks. We don't have “what used to be a heart” attacks.) Similarly, as I claimed in section I, a broken tin-opener -- even though no longer able to perform the proper function of tin-openers -- remains a tin-opener. For it remains true that the proper function of this object -- i.e. that which it would do if it were working properly -- is to open tins.

What this suggests is that functional kinds have a two-stage definition. First, the proper function of objects of the kind is identified. And then the kind is defined to be anything which has that proper function. (In some cases, there may not be anything much more informative which can be said to indicate how one determines what entities have the proper function in question. I shall return to this question later.)

Consequently, it is true that the definition of functional kinds does incorporate a judgement about what those kinds are good for -- and yet it is not true that anything which belongs to the kind must exhibit the value in question. (Of course, these last remarks justify my earlier claim that, even if it were true that the properties of a good tin-opener could be deduced from the definition of a tin-opener, it would not follow that an object must live up to a certain standard in order to be a tin-opener at all. And, while it is not true that the properties of a good tin-opener can be deduced from the definition of a tin-opener, it is true that one property of any good tin-opener can be deduced from the definition of a tin-opener, namely: that it fulfills its proper function, and hence can be used to open tins.)

In sum, then, what I am suggesting is that we should understand Rowe to be claiming that it is the proper function of works of art to serve as objects for disinterested aesthetic contemplation in the widest sense. Of course, this suggestion is incompatible with much else that Rowe says -- but I am fairly confident that it is the most plausible way to fill out the idea that "art" and "work of art" can be given functional definitions. Moreover, the most important consequence of the remarks in this section is that we can now see how terms which have functional definitions can also have purely classificatory primary uses. (*Contra* Rowe, it is not true that "the application of [a functional concept] implies that a certain minimum standard has been reached" (p.218), and nor is it true that "the general principles that make something good art are the same as those which make it art in the first place" (p.218).)

III

There are still problems which face the idea that the proper function of works of art is to serve as objects for disinterested aesthetic contemplation in the widest sense. One important problem, already mentioned, is that we lack a non-circular account of the notion of disinterested aesthetic contemplation. It seems that we can't say merely that "disinterested aesthetic contemplation" is the kind of contemplation appropriate to works of art. But what else can we say?

We could try to produce a (large) theory of "disinterested aesthetic contemplation". Perhaps there is something interesting which can be said about the sort of "contemplation" which is appropriate to painting, sculpture, ballet, dance, music, opera, theatre, poetry, literature, cinema, architecture, etc. However, I doubt that there is any distinctive kind of "contemplation" which is common to the proper appreciation of all of these arts. (The proper appreciation of the various arts seems to call for quite distinct kinds of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. And the "disinterested" application of those skills is also found in play and other recreational activities which must be distinguished from art.) I don't say that these considerations are decisive; however, I think that it would be a good idea to look elsewhere.

Perhaps, then, we ought to give up the idea that the proper function of works of art is to serve as objects for disinterested aesthetic contemplation in the widest sense. Is

there some other proper function which might plausibly be claimed for art? Well, it should certainly be noted that it seems unlikely that there is a short list of socially acknowledged functions of art. Art (properly so-called) has many different social functions: entertainment, instruction, enlightenment, creation of community spirit, exemplary display, play, veneration, etc. Moreover, no one of these functions recommends itself as *the* proper function of art. If it makes sense to speak of “the proper function of art”, it seems unlikely that it will be a social function from this list. Maybe there is some other sort of function which might be pressed into service here - - but, once again, I am sceptical.

In view of the difficulties raised in the last two paragraphs, it might be worth reconsidering the idea that we should insist that “disinterested aesthetic contemplation” just is the sort of treatment which is appropriate to paradigmatic works of art. Of course, as we have already noted, if our interest is in providing a definition of “art” and “work of art”, then this suggestion leads to a (fairly small!) circle. But perhaps there is some other project for which this suggestion is appropriate -- e.g. sketching the geography of aesthetic concepts. And -- even more importantly - - perhaps this other project is the most important one for aestheticians to pursue. (Attempts to provide traditional definitions of “art” and “work of art” -- either through the provision of putatively necessary and sufficient conditions, or through the use of Kripke’s ideas about reference and essential properties -- have repeatedly and notoriously ended in failure. The thought naturally arises that perhaps the guiding project of those attempts may have been misconceived.)

There are benefits in supposing that the concepts of “art” and “work of art” are functional concepts for which the appropriate “proper function” is given merely by a class of paradigmatic examples (and not by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, or a set of essential properties). In particular, one has an explanation of why it is that the quest for a definition has been so unsuccessful. And one also has an explanation of the intuition that the value of works of art is crucial to the concept of a work of art even though there can be works of art which have no value at all.

Furthermore, this idea seems to find an appropriate location for those aspects of twentieth-century art (readymades, found objects, conceptual art, happenings, etc.) which have seemed so problematic to aestheticians. On the one hand, these objects don’t perform the proper function of art -- i.e. they don’t belong to the class of paradigmatic works of art. But, on the other hand, they are firmly ensconced in the class of works of art simply because -- for one reason or another -- the proper function of these objects is the same as that of paradigmatic works of art. (Of course, there is much which needs to be said about how it comes about that, e.g., the proper function of *this* urinal is the proper function of works of art, whereas the proper function of other urinals is the proper function of urinals. In the case just mentioned, the fact that the urinal was exhibited in an art exhibition by a noted artist seems to be particularly important. Whether there is anything more general which might be said is a question which needs further exploration.)

Finally, this suggestion helps to explain certain cases which defeat historical and institutional accounts of art. Consider the case (described in my “On Defining Art Historically”, BJA forthcoming) of an artist who produces a canvas with the intention of destroying it before anyone (even the artist herself) has a chance to look at it. It seems wrong to say that this artist confers art status on her painting (for in virtue of

what does she manage to confer art status on this canvas but not on the egg which she eats for breakfast?); and it also seems wrong to say that this artist intends her painting to be regarded in the way(s) in which paintings have previously been regarded. However, there seems to be no bar to the suggestion that the proper function of her painting is the proper function of works of art precisely because it is the product of a kind of activity which typically issues in objects which have that proper function. (Here, of course, “typically” does not mean “in most cases”; rather, it functions quasi-normatively.)

Of course, there are also costs in the supposition that the concepts “art” and “work of art” are functional concepts for which the appropriate “proper function” is given merely by a class of paradigmatic examples (and not by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, or a set of essential properties). Necessary and sufficient conditions are nice when you can get them -- though, in philosophy, it seems that that is almost never.

And there is much which needs further work. (In particular, much more needs to be said about how something which doesn't fulfill the proper function of works of art nonetheless gets to be a work of art. I think that there are certain sorts of activities whose proper function is the production of works of art: e.g. when paint is properly applied to a canvas, a good work of art results. When these activities are not well carried out, the end result is a work of art which does not fulfill its proper function: e.g. the result of bad technique is a bad painting.Etc.)

However, I do think that the above is the most plausible direction in which to develop the ideas which Rowe sketches in “Why Art Doesn't Have Two Senses”. Whether these ideas can be developed into something more substantial is a question which I am not yet able to answer.