

# SOLVING WOLLHEIM'S DILEMMA: A FIX FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL DEFINITION OF ART

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## Abstract

Wollheim threatened Dickie's institutional definition of art with a dilemma which entailed that the theory is either redundant or incomprehensible and useless. This paper modifies the definition to avoid such criticism. First, I show that its concept of the artworld is not vague when understood as a conventional system of beliefs and practices. Then, basing on Gaut's cluster theory, I provide an account of reasons artworld members have to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation. An authorised member of an artworld has a good reason to confer the status on an object if it satisfies a subset of criteria respected as sufficient within this artworld. The first horn of the dilemma is averted because explaining the reasons behind conferral cannot eliminate references to the institution, and the second loses its sharpness, as accepting partial arbitrariness of the conferral does not deprive the theory of its explanatory power.

## Keywords

cluster account; definition of art; institutional theory; Wollheim

The institutional definition of art, despite being attacked from virtually every direction, remains one of the most attractive and widely discussed theories in aesthetics. Several major issues raised against it have been addressed (see: Davies 1991; Graves 1997; Iseminger 2004; Kasher 1977, 1990; Scholz 1994; Yanal 1998) and it seems that Dickie's theory can, though perhaps with some slight modifications, endure the criticism regarding its circularity, ahistoricity, vagueness in determining what is the artworld and who are its members, etc. I will not assess how successful these solutions are; instead I will focus on a problem which seems to be at least as serious, and has not been, to my knowledge, conclusively resolved – a dilemma given to the institutionalist by Richard Wollheim, who argues that the definition is either superfluous or incomprehensible and useless. I argue that resolving this dilemma requires a major modification of the theory, but as I will show, such a modification does not have to be particularly conceptually difficult, and in the end might actually make it more attractive.

The early version of Dickie's institutional theory states that:

'A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)' (Dickie 1974, 34).

The dilemma Wollheim presents in *Painting as Art* is based on a simple premise: either the representatives of the artworld have reasons for deciding whether a certain artefact is an artwork, or they do not (Wollheim 1987, 13-16). If they do, a correct theory of art should include them as its part and explain arthood in terms of those reasons. However, were the

reasons which justify arthood conferral made salient, they by themselves would constitute a definition of art, and no institutional backing would be required to establish the status of particular artefacts. On the other hand, if the decisions of the artworld representatives are not guided by reasons, we would be justified in doubting their judgement and their authority to tell people what is art, and following this – in denying that the artefacts they pick are actually art. In practice, this could cast doubt on the legitimacy of the entire artworld, which would seem regulated by no laws, and completely arbitrary in determining who can be its member, who has the authority necessary to make art, and which pieces are chosen as art. Either way, the institutional definition is doomed – it is either superfluous, or unjustified.<sup>1</sup>

Dickie claimed later that this and multiple other problems have been resolved with his second institutional definition (Dickie 2000, 94-6; cf. Dickie 1997) which states that ‘a work of art is an artefact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public’ (1997, 80). However, although it is hard not to agree that his earlier views have been vastly misinterpreted, it is not at all obvious that the definition from *The Art Circle* really resolves Wollheim's dilemma. Although it does away with the notion of status conferral and specifies that it is the artist(s) who make(s) artworks, it seems that the dilemma could re-run as follows: either the artists have reasons to present their work to the artworld public, or they do not. On the first horn the institutional theory is still redundant, because were the reasons properly recognised, the work would be art in virtue of satisfying those reasons regardless of whether it were presented or not. On the second – while the legitimacy of artists as persons authorised to make art may be more justified than in the case of mere artworld members, it is still unclear why one should trust them in choosing e.g. their novels rather than their shopping

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1 ‘If the theory takes one alternative, it forfeits its claim to be an *Institutional* theory of art: if it takes the other, it is hard to see how it is an Institutional theory of *art*’ (Wollheim 1980: 164). There has been some controversy over the meaning of the second horn (Dickie 1998: 128). It is perhaps best stated a few paragraphs before Wollheim's catchphrase: ‘if works of art derive their status from conferment, and the status may be conferred for no good reason, the importance of the status is placed in serious doubt’ (163-164). Below, I will treat it according to this formulation.

lists for presentation. In the following discussion I will mainly refer to the early definition, simply because this is the one criticised by Wollheim, however, all my arguments apply equally to both versions of the institutional theory.

Solving Wollheim's dilemma requires addressing several issues. Firstly, the underlying worry behind the objection is that an institutionalist cannot really make sense of the very central notion of his theory – the artworld. It is unclear what sort of institution the artworld is, how does one become its member, how does one gain authority within it, etc. Secondly, it is unclear what exactly counts as arthood conferral (or presentation to the public) – is just saying 'this is my new artwork' to a couple of friends enough, or is an exhibition in a gallery required? Thirdly, some answer to the question about reasons for conferral (or presentation) has to be given, possibly together with an indication of what might be those reasons. Finally, if the essential institutionality of art is to be saved, we need an argument which would show that even if there are such reasons, the artworld still plays an important explanatory role.

Before I proceed, some clarifications are due. (1) I do not attempt here to solve every possible problem ever raised against the institutional theory. I believe that independent solutions are available for problems such as circularity, private art or open concept challenge (see: Davies 1991; Dickie 1997, 2000; Graves 1997; Iseminger 2004; Kasher 1977, 1990; Levinson 1979; Lord 1987; Scholz 1994; Yanal 1998). This paper simply addresses a separate problem in a way which is not obviously incompatible with solutions to those other issues, and even if one were to doubt the successfulness of the other solutions, resolving just Wollheim's dilemma still constitutes an important step in defending the institutional definition. (2) My solution retains several controversial elements of Dickie's view – notably it entails that objects can become art mid-life, and that the artist's intentions may play no role in the art-status of his works. I simply believe that by this I remain true to the spirit of the

institutional theory, and since the intuitions in those matters seem to be divided, I think that they need no more justification than Dickie already provided. (3) For the sake of the simplicity and clarity of this argument I limit my analysis to the boundaries sketched by Dickie – I speak only about art as *we*, 'present day Westerners,' understand it (Dickie 1969, 254). However, essentially my argument allows for dropping this limitation.

### **The artworld, its members, their authority – and the status conferral.**

Wollheim ridicules Dickie's theory, asking where are the representatives of the artworld nominated, what records are kept of their conferrals of the status of candidate for appreciation, etc. (1987, 15). In reply, Dickie simply claims this to be a misinterpretation of his view, which never assumed the existence of any formal institutions. Such a 'robust view' is obviously false (Dickie 2000, 95). The institutional theory requires only informal institutions to exist – there are no art-officers needed to confirm that a certain artefact is an artwork, similarly as there are no fashion-officers needed to settle whether someone is well-dressed. The artworld is not 'a formally organised body, perhaps of a kind which has meetings and requires a quorum to do business . . . [but as] the broad, informal cultural practice' (Dickie 1997, 9; cf. 1969, 254). In fact, not only does the artworld not have to be organised – it does not even have to be particularly unified when it comes to deciding what is art and what is not. It is not 'artworld acting as a whole which makes art . . . [but] individual persons who typically make works of art or . . . groups of persons who make art' (Dickie 1997, 9).

I would like to build on these suggestions, other authors' intuitions concerning art being a collection of cultural practices (e.g. Carroll 1988), some of the research presented by Asa Kasher (1990) and David Graves (1997), as well as fairly standard understanding of what a cultural or social system is, described, among others, by Ward Hunt Goodenough (1966). I will keep this section down to the most essential sketch which largely reconstructs views of

other people, hoping that it will suffice to show that we can, after all, make some sense of the central notions in the institutional theory.

I understand the artworld to be a commonly shared system of beliefs and related practices regarding art. It is not composed of people and objects, but a set of beliefs regarding art creation, presentation and appreciation, including knowledge of artistic and aesthetic conventions, and such beliefs as 'one should behave quietly during a musical performance', 'Renaissance paintings are typically representational', 'novels should be printed on paper, not shouted out in the forest', etc. Together with those beliefs come certain social practices related to art making, presenting and appreciating. On such an analysis it is unimportant whether a cultural institution is formalised or not, as long as the beliefs which form it are commonly shared and respected. While formalising it would certainly ensure greater convergence in the beliefs held by particular members of the institution, its lack means merely that the artworld is simply not particularly unified – a claim which Dickie was happy to embrace anyway. However, it would be wrong to say that the artworld is not unified at all – while it might not have rule-books which list all the beliefs which are to be shared universally or members with clearly defined authority to make final decisions (as e.g. a legal system does), it does have books which at least strongly suggest which beliefs should be commonly shared and figures of great, if not ultimate authority.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the beliefs and practices of the artworld are more clearly defined than those of e.g. fashion-world.

The above helps determining who the members of the artworld are – they are those persons who share, to a certain degree, the beliefs and take part in the practices which constitute the artworld. This characterisation is naturally vague, as it is unclear what portion

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2 As I mentioned before, I realise that this analysis overlooks the fact that there might be systematic differences between beliefs and practices of different cultures, or the same culture from different times. I extend my analysis to cover such cases elsewhere (see my 'The Cultural Theory of Art', forthcoming), and for now I simply limit myself (following Dickie) to the boundaries of art seen from the modern Western perspective.

of those beliefs a person needs to share to qualify. However, as will become apparent soon, this does not trouble my account, because unlike Dickie, I do not think that just any member of the artworld can make an artwork – instead, certain degree of authority and recognition of the properties of the artwork-to-be are required. Thus for now I am happy to accept that anyone who has enough grasp of the artworld to appoint themselves its member, is thereby a member.

I follow Stephen Davies (1991, 84ff.) in his analysis of what it means to be authorised to confer the status of a candidate for appreciation (or: present to the public), and argue that only figures which have this authority can actually make artworks. Such figures have acquired their status through participation in the artworld practices, can assume authoritative roles within the artworld (e.g. 'artist', 'critic', 'curator') and are 'entitled successfully to employ the conventions by which art status is conferred on objects/events' – e.g. displaying in a gallery, presenting to a public, giving a title, etc. (Davies 1991, 87). To supplement Davies' account with my characterisation of the artworld, at least a part of a person's authority derives from her proficiency in the knowledge of art-related beliefs and ability to follow the practices, which, in turn, are linked to the roles they assume.

Finally, status conferral itself is one of the practices which constitute the artworld. Following Davies (1991, 87-8), what exactly constitutes conferral depends on the beliefs shared by the artworld members and the conventions they employ. A status conferral is successful when it is performed in a conventional way by a person assuming an authoritative role. It is unessential that an artwork thereby created should gain wider acceptance of the artworld, as it is perfectly acceptable that an object should be art in virtue of having the status conferred upon it by a small group of people – in this case it is art, but it so happens that most people do not know about it.

### Solving the dilemma

Now that we can make reasonable sense of the basics, it is possible to actually address the dilemma. Surely even if we say that  $x$  becomes an artwork once an authorised person performs a conventional conferral act, all within the setting of a belief-practice system that is the artworld, it seems fair to ask what reasons did that person have in choosing this particular object?

I agree with Wollheim that Dickie's theory cannot stand against his objection unchanged, but I will show that it is possible to modify it in a way which will both answer the problem, and preserve the essentially institutional nature. I agree that the members of the institution have reasons for status conferral and I agree that these reasons should be mentioned by the theory. However, I will show that references to the institution are not thereby rendered redundant. Ultimately, I will argue that sitting on both horns of Wollheim's dilemma can be quite comfortable.

The idea behind the first horn is that were the artworld members to have good reasons to confer the status on  $x$ , those reasons would concern the properties – internal or contextual – of  $x$ . Since this would in practice mean that  $x$  would gain art-status in virtue of having certain properties, the act of conferral seems superfluous – no one needs to confer the status for everyone to see that  $x$  is an artwork. Ultimately, finding out about the said properties would lead to formulating an essentialist or contextual definition which would not need to mention the institution.

There is, however, a vital gap in this reasoning. On one hand there are the authorised artworld members' *reasons to confer the status* and on the other – the object's *properties which ensure status conferral*. It is assumed that the reason one has to confer the status *just is* the fact that the object has certain properties, or at least that having those properties is *sufficient* to get the status. This is because allowing that having those properties can be



insufficient, or perhaps even not necessary, seemingly leads to the other horn of the dilemma – agreeing that the status is conferred in an arbitrary way. However, the issue is more complicated than it seems. The question that should be asked, and which brings back reference to the institution, is: what determines which properties possessed by an object constitute reasons for status conferral?

I agree with Wollheim that the members of the artworld do have reasons to confer the status – what is more, there are theories which capture those reasons rather well. I refer here to Berys Gaut's cluster account, on which objects are art in virtue of satisfying a number of disjunctively sufficient criteria (Gaut 2000). I propose to treat the cluster account as an auxiliary theory within the institutional definition, and reformulate it for this purpose in such a way that what Gaut calls *satisfying sufficient subsets of criteria* for arthood are to be treated as *reasons* the authorised members of the artworld take into account when conferring the art-status.

The cluster theory claims that the term 'art' is ascribed to objects which have a certain non-arbitrary subset of an expandable set (cluster) of properties commonly ascribed to art. The set includes properties such as 'possessing positive aesthetic properties', 'being expressive of emotion', 'formally complicated', 'belonging to an established artistic form' or 'being the product of an intention to make a work of art' (Gaut 2000, 28), and while none of these properties is individually necessary for arthood, they are disjunctively necessary, and some subsets of those properties are sufficient. Properties included in the cluster and their sufficient subsets are not arbitrary – they are determined by Wittgensteinian 'looking and seeing' (ibid.; 2005, 277). In order to find which properties are criterial, and which subsets of criteria are sufficient, one needs to inspect the beliefs which make up the artworld. Since it is believed that 'being beautiful' counts towards being art, while 'being made on a Thursday' does not, it is the former property which should be included in the cluster.<sup>3</sup>

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3 This, as Gaut proposed in private conversation, answers a worry raised by Aaron Meskin (2007) – the reason

My idea is to rephrase this as follows: authorised members of the artworld confer the art-status on objects, taking the possession of selected subsets of properties included in the cluster of properties commonly ascribed to art as reasons justifying such conferral.<sup>4</sup> Similarly as in Gaut's account, none of these properties are individually necessary, and some subsets of properties are sufficient as good reasons for status conferral. To rephrase this, the possession of no single property from the cluster always ensures conferral of the status, but in general properties 'count towards' conferring it. In practice, authorised members of the artworld confer the status on objects satisfying a subset of properties  $\alpha$  because they hold the belief: 'satisfying  $\alpha$  is a good reason for arthood conferral.'

The modified definition is as follows:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artefact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some *authorised* person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (*an artworld*), *for reasons determined by the criteria for arthood respected by the members of this institution.*

A natural question to ask, at this point, is whether this move does not fall straight into Wollheim's trap and show that the institutional theory *is* indeed reducible, in this case to the cluster account. There are at least two reasons why this is not the case, and accepting any one of those ensures that the institution stays in play.

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why it seemed to him that irrelevant properties may end up included in the cluster, was because he assumed that the 'looking and seeing' means inspecting specific objects, rather than artworld beliefs.

4 It might seem that this makes the definition circular. However, the notion 'art' refers to two different things in the explanans and explanandum, i.e. in ' $X$  is art iff people confer the status on it because it satisfies a subset of properties respected as criterial for art' the first term refers to the concept 'art', while in the second occurrence it refers to its extension (this is parallel to that advocated by Levinson in his 1979). Moreover, Dickie is happy to accept the circularity of his definition and if it does not threaten his view, neither should it threaten my modification of it.

Firstly, while the conferral is based on recognizing that a given artefact satisfies a sufficient subset of criteria for arthood (which gives one a reason to confer the status), it is impossible to tell which subsets of criteria for arthood are sufficient without referring back to the artworld. I argue that it is not a universal truth that satisfying subset  $\alpha$  constitutes a good reason for status conferral – instead it is merely one of the beliefs that make up the artworld. In fact, the only reason why satisfying this rather than that subset of criteria should constitute a good reason, is because it is believed to be so within the artworld. Following this, if the fact that satisfying  $\alpha$  is a good reason for conferral is explained by a belief shared by the artworld members, then the institution – which just is the set of beliefs and practices shared by artworld members – cannot be eliminated from the equation.

The issue can be approached from the other end. Gaut argued that the method of finding out which subsets of criteria are sufficient for arthood, is to ‘look and see’, or find out by inspection (Gaut 2000, 28; 2005, 277). I believe that one should do exactly that: go and find out which subsets of criteria are actually treated as sufficient for status conferral. But I also believe that by such looking and seeing one will not find out what those criteria are in a deep metaphysical and human-independent way – instead one will find out what people think those criteria are. In fact, were one to ‘look and see’ elsewhere than among modern Western art lovers, one would likely find that other people think that the criteria might be slightly different.<sup>5</sup> In institutional terms, members of different artworlds can differ in what they believe are sufficient subsets of criteria for arthood, and treat satisfying different subsets of those criteria as reasons for status conferral. Following this, again, since what are reasons for status conferral is determined by artworld members’ beliefs, and what is art is (partially) determined by the reasons, what is art is (partially) determined by the artworld members’ beliefs, i.e. the artworld.

<sup>5</sup> I believe that though Gaut agrees with this point, he basically, on one hand, wants to defend the general disjunctive framework of the cluster rather than the particular criteria, and on the other – is really only interested in applying the account to modern Western notion of art.

This seems not only in line with the theoretical framework, but also can explain the actual artistic practice, both current and historical. The modified institutional theory has hereby one great advantage – it provides a simple and natural explanation to why e.g. Kandinsky's *Circles in a Circle* is an artwork now, but would likely not be one in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. This is because while it does satisfy a subset of criteria respected as sufficient now (or within Artworld<sub>now</sub>), the same subset of criteria was not respected as sufficient in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (or within Artworld<sub>17th Century</sub>). Contemporarily it allows to e.g. say why the arthood of modern art is often questioned – this is because while the connoisseurs judge it according to the criteria respected as sufficient within Artworld<sub>post-Avant-garde</sub>, the general public is often simply unaware of the developments brought by the Avant-garde and judges it according to the criteria respected as sufficient within Artworld<sub>no-Avant-garde</sub>, or as if the Avant-garde never happened.

This might be enough to save the essential institutionalism, but there is more. The above formulation only entails that having reasons is *necessary* for arthood – it only becomes *sufficient* together with the conferral itself. Wollheim argued that once the reasons for conferring the status are salient, the conferring itself is unnecessary, and whether an object is art is determined solely by it possessing the properties which we would take as reasons to confer status. However, one can resist this conclusion and insist on the necessity of conferral through preserving a part of the arbitrary nature of Dickie's view. The institutional theory's appeal lies largely in the fact that it can occasionally simply cut the definitional Gordian knot by stating: 'it has turned out that way', or 'because the artist said so' (Dickie 2000, 100). Such arbitrariness does not, naturally, seem particularly attractive to many philosophers, because it denies them the ability to explain things philosophically, offering brute facts about the (art)world in place of neat lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. Following Dickie, however, I prefer to provide an account of art as it is actually understood, practised and

treated, and I am more concerned with the theory fitting the real world, not some ideal for an elegant theory – thus if in the real world it so happens that certain distinctions are made arbitrarily, the theory should recognise that.<sup>6</sup> Below I will try to show that allowing for some arbitrariness is not as problematic as one could think.

I believe that there are numerous cases in which the actual practice of art is somewhat under-justified, and below I discuss two which seem most obvious.

(1) The case of craft works appropriated by the artworld. It seems that one does not need to refer to fairly rare and problematic cases of perceptually indistinguishable objects to make a case for institutionalism – many folk artworks which fill galleries have had the status conferred upon them by curators, critics, etc., while being in all relevant respects identical to folk craft works which never left their place of origin and are simply used as utility objects (see: Shiner 2001, xv). For example, Susan Arrowood's *Sacret Bibel* is a quilt displayed in American Folk Art Museum. For all we know, the artist did not intend her work to be art – not only was she not an active or perhaps even competent member of the artworld, but quilts were not even considered an art form at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Furthermore, one can reasonably assume that the work was intended to serve decorative and devotional functions. Needless to say, it is in all relevant respects (i.e. those which are related to the cluster of criteria for arthood) identical to multiple religious-themed quilts, like those made by my grandmother – decorated and used as bed throws. Naturally, there is a reason why *Sacret Bibel* can be art – it satisfies at least one sufficient subset of criteria, and in conferring the status the curators certainly took this into account. But my grandmother's quilts seem to satisfy the very same criteria! If the conferral were of no importance, one would have to say that since both objects satisfy the same subsets of criteria they should either both be art or

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<sup>6</sup> Noël Carroll in a similar context wrote that 'there is an underlying philosophical dream such that, ideally, all the relevant answers [...] should fit into a tidy theoretical package' (Carroll 1994: 7). Needless to say, I agree that providing answers which are less tidy but actually true is better than dreaming up ones which would be nice, but are wrong.

both not be art. This is, however, not the case, and I doubt that anyone should ever seriously call my grandmother's decorated bed throws art. It might be that in such cases it takes a person of a certain authority to decide which of the objects satisfying the same subsets should be art, or even deciding that only one, rather than all of them should (see: Davies 1991, 88), but this only confirms the role of the institution. It might also be that *Sacret Bibel* has multiple contextual properties by which it differs from my grandmother's quilts, e.g. being selected by an expert in art, being placed in the context of art history, etc. – however, it clearly had no such properties *before* the status conferral, at the time when it was chosen, and while choosing, one could have just as well given the same properties to any other comparable craft work (Davies 1991, 66ff.). What follows is that while satisfying subsets of criteria respected as sufficient is important because it gives one reasons to confer the status, someone still has to do the conferring.

(2) The dog shows case, as described by Dickie (2000, 100). There seems to be a number of practices in many respects similar to art and objects very similar to artworks, which are not artworks. It is rather unclear why e.g. modern performance art is art, but dog shows or military parades are not, or why Mackintosh's Art Nouveau chairs are art, but carved Victorian chairs are not. Were one to omit the status conferral and consider the reasons or criteria only, it seems likely that one would find that both dog shows and some modern performances satisfy exactly the same subsets of criteria respected as sufficient within our artworld, and thus again – both should be either art or not art. Indeed, there seems to be little good explanation for why objects such as classic cars, lingerie, military parades, etc. should not be art, other than Dickie's 'it has turned out that way'. However, if this is accepted, it seems inevitable to acknowledge that again, there not only have to be reasons to confer status on an object, but also someone has to actually do the conferring.

Finally, here comes the second horn of Wollheim's dilemma – if the artworld's decisions are arbitrary, is the theory uninformative again? Why should we trust Duchamp and agree that *Bottle Rack* is indeed art, but its twin bottle rack is not? The modified definition provides some reasons, Wollheim could claim, but those reasons do not fully or perhaps even meaningfully constrain the decisions of the artworld members – it is still possible to arbitrarily deny the status to objects despite having reasons to confer it.

I partially concur, but argue that my modification of the theory renders the second horn of the dilemma benign: it shows that the artworld's decisions are not arbitrary enough to make the theory uninformative. Yes, one does have to agree that sometimes an object may not be an artwork even though it does satisfy a subset of criteria respected as sufficient, simply because no one has conferred the status upon it, but this should not be surprising. Similarly, there have been many honourable people who did great service to their country yet have never been knighted – while a sad fact, this is hardly a conceptual problem. Meanwhile, introducing the talk about reasons for conferral allows one to: (1) explain why certain objects are artworks and others are not (i.e. because only the former satisfy a subset of properties respected as good reasons for arthood conferral, and got the status conferred upon them); (2) say that were one to confer status on an object which does not satisfy any subset of criteria respected as sufficient (i.e. there is no good reason to confer the status), the object is not an artwork (or at least not an artwork within the given artworld) and one was mistaken in conferring the status or treating the object as art; (3) predict which objects could become artworks were an authorised person to confer the status upon them (i.e. those which satisfy a subset respected as sufficient). This seems to be most if not all that one would expect of a classificatory theory. In fact, if anything, I believe that my reformulation makes the institutional theory more informative than it was in the first place, providing it with a way of accounting for mistaken status attribution, thus giving it the edge it lacked.

Moreover, my modification of the institutional theory allows one to explain why the original definition seemed so unattractive to some, including Wollheim. It indeed seems odd that we should ever need an authorised artworld member to tell us that *Mona Lisa* is art – surely we can just see for ourselves. The explanation is simple. At least one of the things which makes some artworks so paradigmatic is that they satisfy virtually all criteria accepted within the artworld. This, in turn, means that they satisfy multiple subsets of criteria respected as sufficient, i.e. there are dozens of good reasons to confer the status onto them. Unsurprisingly, it takes no art-scholar to notice that – it seems blindingly obvious that *Mona Lisa* should be art to even marginally competent artworld members. However, this does not mean that conferral is obsolete, merely that no great competence or authority is required to perform it, and that while Leonardo has already conferred the status, were he to die before he managed to present the painting to anyone, pretty much any artworld member who found it could have done it. The same is not true of less obvious and borderline cases, and perhaps it is in here that the workings of the authoritative artworld members are more apparent. (I do not want to commit myself to the claim that the number of reasons for status conferral is inversely proportional to the authority required to confer the status – the issue is certainly more complex than that. However, it seems intuitive that there is *some* correlation between the two.)

### **Wollheim Strikes Back (at a meta-level)**

A defender of Wollheim might stop at this point and ask: does that modification really solve the problem, or does it merely defer it? After all it seems like the dilemma can be now restated in exactly the same form, but targeting the reasons for conferral: why is it that members of the artworld have those reasons and not other ones? It again seems that either they are justified in having those particular reasons (in which case the institutional element is



obsolete), or the reasons are selected *ad hoc* (and then the theory is no more informative than it was).

However, I believe that this is less problematic than it seems. The response to taking the dilemma to the meta-level is taking my defence strategy to the meta-level as well – surely members of the artworld may well have reasons for having specific reasons. For example, believing that satisfying *Bottle Rack's* subset  $\alpha$  is a good reason is justified by beliefs such as 'art should look for new media and means of expression', the somewhat exaggerated post-Romantic status of the artists who had enough authority to convince the public to almost anything, the historical facts about Art Nouveau artists who created utility objects such as bottle racks, etc. These are naturally only some *prima facie* ideas for what such reasons might be – to find out what they are exactly one would need to once again apply the method of looking and seeing, or perhaps ask art historians. As long as it is possible to find those reasons, my analysis is safe.

Or is it? It seems that the reasons Wollheim requires for conferral are different in kind from those I quoted above – the former are *normative* or *justificatory*, while the latter are *causal* or *explanatory*.<sup>7</sup> Causal reasons will not protect the theory from being impaled on the second horn of the dilemma at the meta level, since they do not fully or meaningfully determine which subsets of criteria are considered sufficient. They merely provide a story explaining how we came about treating some subsets as sufficient.

This, however, is far from worrying. Dickie never intended the institutional theory to be a deep metaphysical revealing of the nature of art. In fact, the point of institutionalism is in denying that art has a nature and holding instead that it is a matter of a social practice. In this sense the theory is deflationary – its point is not to provide a set of universal criteria capturing the essence of art, it is to get right what is art and what is not, by whatever means are most efficient. The worry expressed in the second horn of the dilemma (at the meta-level) is that

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank the *Metaphilosophy* referee for pointing this out to me.

unless artworld members have *normative* reasons (which justify the choice of subsets of criteria used as reasons) for status conferral, their decisions are untrustworthy and they are impotent of conferring anything at all. The modified institutional theory does not escape this horn, but it can resist its conclusion: providing causal reasons is in fact enough to justify the choice of particular subsets of criteria, and following this, it does enable one to classify artworks correctly. The arbitrariness of Dickie's 'it has turned out that way' was worrying, but with the modified definition it is possible to tell *why* it has turned out that way – and this is all that is needed. Were Wollheim to argue that it is not, he could just as well say: the institutional theory is wrong, because it is not a metaphysical theory. The answer is simple: being metaphysical is not a universal measure of success.

Still, one may not be satisfied with such a response – why should Wollheim not just keep asking for reasons for reasons for reasons, etc., thus forcing the modified institutional theory into a regress? However, once one agrees to accept the value of causal reasons, such regress is nothing to worry about. Firstly, it seems that the majority of the reasons which can be provided do not require one to enter new meta-levels – instead they are historical. What constitutes good reasons in the modern artworld is justified largely by what constituted good reasons in the past, and by whatever other historical developments happened in the meantime. Asking for reasons would then be nothing else but tracing history backwards, perhaps as far back as whatever religious, magical or social practices art developed from. Secondly, I think that the above discussion is sufficient to show that even if a regress would ensue, it would be a benign one. At every new meta-level where the dilemma could be stated, an answer can be given, and while some looking and seeing may be needed to provide it, there is no reason why at any point one should stop being able to look and see further. Finally, even if at some point any part of the explanation found any sort of foundational reason, e.g. somewhere down the line from  $\alpha$ , simple aestheticism may be justified by the evolutionary advantage of taking

pleasure in certain patterns described as 'beautiful', such reasons would be effectively mediated by so many levels of artworld- and history-dependant factors and changes, that they cease to matter. After all, no one would seriously explain that *Bottle Rack* is art because it was important from the evolutionary perspective that humans could appreciate the contrast between red and green to find fruit – at least not without taking into account all the history in between.

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