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"Functional and Procedural Definitions of Art"

This paper is concerned with the two most important ways of approaching the matter of art's definition - functionalism and proceduralism. Some authors expressly commit themselves to the task of definition and to one or other of these two camps.¹ Others reveal a commitment the one way or the other by the terms in which they discuss artworks, whether or not they are engaged with the enterprise of definition.² My aim here is not to adjudicate the dispute between the two views, but to draw out the difference in their conceptions of the nature of art. It is useful to provide such an overview, I believe, because the two camps rarely make explicit their presuppositions, and so each regularly begs the question against the other by taking for granted one thing or another which the other side is committed to rejecting. In this way both sides regularly fail to engage with the concerns of their opponents and the polemical dust raised by their clashes obscures the bases of their disagreements.

The functionalist holds that there is some distinctive need met by art in our lives and that it is in terms of this need that art is to be defined. While art might meet many interests - for example it might be valued as a financial investment - such interests explain why artworks might be referred to and appreciated as investments and the like, but they do not explain why we have the concept of art and appreciate artworks qua art. The primary value of art is hedonic, rather than moral or pragmatic. Accordingly, protagonists of functionalism characterise the point of art as its providing a distinctive experience ("aesthetic experience") which is valued for the enjoyment to which it gives rise. According to functionalism, it is a necessary condition for something's being an artwork that it (be intended to) possess the capacity to generate aesthetic experience. A piece merits art-status in virtue of its possessing (or being intended to possess) properties which, when experienced aesthetically, will be gratifying. Whatever incantations are performed over a thing, that thing can be an artwork only if it has the capacity to produce an experience of not insignificant magnitude.

By contrast, the proceduralist holds that it is a necessary condition for a thing's being an artwork that it be "baptised" as art by someone with the authority thereby to confer art-status upon the piece. Such authority is vested in informally structured roles occupied by persons in the Artworld. That a piece would produce "aesthetic experience" were it to be an artwork is one excellent reason for conferring art-status upon it, but whether or not a thing is or becomes an artwork necessarily is a matter of its receiving the appropriate imprimatur, rather than of its functionality.

But why should these two approaches to art's definition be seen as opposed? Why not see them as complementary? Why not say that, in many respects, art is importantly functional and that, in other respects, art is importantly conventional/procedural/institutional? The answer to these questions is this: the procedures by which art-status is conferred might always part company from art's function. That is to say, there is no reason why the use of those procedures must always take as its goal the promotion of art's point. Indeed, there is no reason why the use of the procedures might not aim at conferring art-status on items which are incapable of engaging with the functional point of art. For example, artists and others have attempted to confer art-status on "found" objects (such as pieces of driftwood) and on

"readymades" (such as snow shovels) and in some such cases they did so not because they recognised in those objects aesthetically meritorious properties but, rather, precisely (and perhaps perversely) because such items seemed to lack any aesthetically rewarding properties at all. Where function and procedure might always separate, the issue of whether art is to be defined the one way as opposed to the other will be significant. And where artists have set out deliberately to force the two apart, the issue of whether art is to be defined the one way or the other becomes unavoidable. When the Artworld is faced with "hard cases" of possible-art - such cases being putative artworks which fall into the gap left by the separation of the function of artworks from the procedures used in their creation as possible-art - then the person attempting to provide an unequivocal definition of arthood cannot convincingly settle for an each-way bet.

The two approaches to art's definition differ in three important respects.

(1) The Status of Hard Cases

According to the procedural account of art's definition, most hard cases of possible-art really are artworks because art-status is conferred upon those works by artists and others in accordance with the appropriate procedures. For instance, Duchamp, as an avant-garde artist, was able to create a urinal (or several sets of urinals) indistinguishable from many other urinals as the artwork Fountain. Titling and presenting an object within the appropriate institutional setting are examples of the procedures used by Duchamp in creating Fountain as an artwork. According to a proceduralist on art's definition, we cannot expect a definition of art to give us any grip on the puzzlement caused by hard cases (unless there is some doubt about whether or not the use of the relevant procedures was available to a given person in the face of a given item). Usually hard cases will be "hard" not because their status is in doubt, but, rather because they set up a tension between the point of the concept of art and actual instances of art. And the philosophical interest will not be found so much in art's definition as in a discussion of the attitude appropriate to that tension.

If, on the other hand, art is to be defined functionally, hard cases will be "hard" as a matter of determining their possible status as art. Candidates for the status of art will qualify or not as art to the extent that they serve the point of art. An artwork will be (at least, whatever else is involved) worthy of its status as a result of its meeting the point of the concept. The difficulty posed by Duchamp's Fountain is the difficulty of seeing if there is some way in which the work might reward an aesthetic interest (perhaps by referring to the tradition of sculpture, for example) and so qualify, after all, as an artwork. That is to say, the difficulty of seeing if and whether Fountain might be reconciled to the point of art is to be seen also as a difficulty in determining if Fountain really is or is not an artwork.

In practice, proceduralists see no special difficulty in the view that the efforts of the avant-garde conforms with the historically- and socially-based use of the procedures for conferring art-status, and so they are inclined to see their definitions as encompassing the works of the avant-garde. By contrast, functionalists on art's definition tend not to see such works as promoting aesthetic appreciation in a rewarding fashion, and so they are disinclined to accept that such pieces have genuine art-status.

The disagreement about the status as art of hard cases might be characterised this way: many works of the avant-garde seem to challenge the very traditions and conventions upon which the point of art might be supposed to depend - for example, by attempting to break down the barrier between art and reality, as Duchamp tried to do with his readymades. Now, according to the view which sees art as a concept to be defined procedurally, it is (thought usually to be) beyond question that such pieces are artworks. They are created by artists or others who have earned the authority to confer art-status; they are discussed by critics; they are presented within the context of the Artworld as objects for (aesthetic) appreciation; they are discussed by art-historians; and so forth. Such works could perhaps not have been artworks in the past (even had they been created by established artists of the past), in that both

the Artworld and the artist had to be "ready" for this new use of the conventions for conferring art-status. Nevertheless, such pieces are held undoubtedly to be artworks where they have been created in accordance with the "rules" used to confer art-status (at a time and under conditions where those rules can so be employed). But, this view continues, to the extent that such works undermine the very point of art they do call to account the usefulness of that general classification. The status of such works as art is dubious only in the sense that they call into question the status of all art by pursuing a use of the conventions of art-creation which is at odds with the point of art. According to this account, we might regard the activities of such avant-garde artists as counter-productive in that their activities undermine the status of art in general, although the status (as instances of art in general) of the artworks they produce is not in doubt. Whereas, according to the view by which art is a concept to be defined functionally, pieces such as these are controversial in their claim to be artworks. On this view, works which seem to undermine the point of art could not automatically qualify as art. What is controversial is their claim to art-status, rather than the way in which they reflect generally on the classification of pieces as art. Such pieces, at best, have not validated their claim to art-status. So the frequently asked question '...but is it art?' is not to be parsed as a question about the merits as art of the piece, but is to be understood literally as asking if the piece qualifies for elevation to the status of art at all.

(2) Descriptive Versus Evaluative Definitions

It is not uncommon to find in the philosophical literature disagreement over whether the classificatory use of 'artwork' is essentially descriptive or evaluative. This debate arises, I believe, out of the difference between functional and procedural approaches to the definitions of the term. On either view, art will be evaluated as such in terms of its point, in that good art will be art which would serve that point. According to the view that art is to be defined procedurally, the proper classification of pieces as art will be purely descriptive. Once they are classified, artworks then will be evaluated insofar as they promote the point of so classifying them. Works which qualify as art according to the descriptive criteria will then be subject to evaluation, and works which tend to function in a way which undermines the point of the classification will, thereby, be bad. Whereas, according to the view that art is to be defined functionally, the act of classification is itself evaluative, since only works which do not undermine the point of art will qualify as such. On this view there is a threshold of merit, where merit is measured in terms of the efficiency of a piece in promoting the point of art, which a work must meet before it qualifies as an artwork. Then, within works so classified, a further evaluation might be attempted as a measure of the extent to which a particular artwork exceeds the threshold of merit which qualifies it in the first place for the classification.³ A piece which does not attain the threshold level of merit (for example, because it challenges the point of art) will not qualify as art. A piece which does attain that threshold will qualify as art, but if it does not exceed that threshold it will be bad art relative to those artworks which do exceed the threshold.

Osborne implies that functionalists on art's definition simply are confused in failing to appreciate that evaluation presupposes a prior basis for classification, since evaluations are class-relative.⁴ As the following discussion reveals, they are not confused in the way that Osborne suspects - classification might depend upon a threshold of merit along some dimension even if subsequent evaluation of class members is made also in terms of that dimension.

Tilghman makes clear that the distinction between classification and evaluation is not an easy one to draw.⁵ He distinguishes three readings of the question '...but is it art?' The first is a straightforward question about the work's credentials, about whether the piece was made by an artist, belongs in a gallery, and so on; the second is a question about how good as art the piece is; and the third is a question about whether or not the piece meets the point of art. This third question is asked by someone who accepts the piece's formal credentials as art (for example, who knows that the piece is made by an artist who was funded by the Arts' Council,

that the piece is insured as art, and so forth) and who is not yet in a position to evaluate the piece as art because he or she cannot see how to approach the piece as art. Tilghman points out that the person does not want to be told how the piece belongs within the institution, because that story is a story about its credentials. To approach the piece as art, according to Tilghman, is to see how the piece can function as art.

Tilghman's three questions show up the issue which is at stake. A functionalist on art's definition is not someone who crudely confuses classificatory questions with "ordinary" aesthetic evaluation. The functionalist makes two measures of the work against the function of art. The first, the classificatory move, considers whether or not the piece has the potential to engage at all (or to a sufficient degree) with the point of art. The evaluative move comes second, if it comes at all; a piece which has been classified as art then is judged to be good or bad art relative to its success in meeting the point of art. The functionalist allows for the possibility in which a piece is technically an artwork in that it has the right "formal" credentials, without its being approachable as art, and hence, without its really being art.

Insightful though Tilghman's approach is in showing how the functionalist on art's definition dodges the accusation of confusedly running together classificatory and commendatory judgments about art, he shows little grasp of the proceduralist's position. A proceduralist on art's definition argues that art-status is no more and no less than the possession of the appropriate credentials. Tilghman seems to think that this is an unacceptably crude view just because it brushes aside the real, practical difficulty posed by modern art to the person genuinely interested in art and its appreciation. But Tilghman sees the issue this way only because he begs the question against the proceduralist in thinking that a thing achieves art-status only by its engaging with the point of art. Whereas in fact a proceduralist on art's definition is not someone who crudely sees no problem in approaching difficult cases as artworks. Rather, the proceduralist differs from the functionalist on art's definition in suggesting that the problem does not follow from, or correspond to, a difficulty about the status of the item as an artwork.

(3) Definition and the Importance of Art

The two views differ with respect to the matter of whether or not a definition might be judged to be satisfactory or not in accordance with its providing a way of accounting for the place that artworks fill in our lives. A functionalist on the matter of art's definition will judge a definition to be adequate only if it explains the point of our distinguishing art from other things, since, for the functionalist, what makes a thing an artwork is a matter of its filling art's role in our lives. By contrast, a proceduralist on art's definition will see no reason to expect that a successful definition should account for the place of art in our lives, since, for the proceduralist, what makes a thing an artwork is quite a different matter from what it is that fits artworks for their functional role. Accepting that a procedural definition cannot explain the importance of art, the proceduralist can concede that no adequate theory of art could leave that matter undiscussed, but a proceduralist on art's definition would go on to deny that a definition must be substitutable for a complete theory if it is to be acceptable.

Now I illustrate the question-begging manner in which the two approaches discuss each other's positions.

For his part, Dickie has denied that art serves any single or pervasive need and he does so in a way which suggests that he rejects the view that art is functional.⁶ But the fact that not all artworks serve a single or pervasive need is consistent, given Dickie's proceduralist views, with a functional account of art's importance. Because procedure and function have drifted apart, and because art is to be defined procedurally, then not all artworks will be appropriately functional. This fact is not at odds with a functional characterisation of the importance of art in general - indeed, our reasons for adopting and operating the procedures in terms of which art-status is said by the proceduralist to be conferred are rendered

inexplicable without some acknowledgment of the functionality of art in general as giving cause for us to institute and maintain the relevant procedures. The procedural definition of art is consistent with the view that art in general is importantly functional; where the views are opposed is in their assessment of whether the functionality of art is the basis for its correct definition.

On their side, Dickie's functionalist opponents have been quick to beg the question against his institutional definition of art. They have attacked his theory for its failure to reveal the point of art⁷; for its identifying as artworks pieces which are controversial in that they challenge the very point of art⁸; and for its assumption that a descriptive as opposed to an evaluative definition is possible.⁹ Of course, if one rejects as does the proceduralist the functionalist assumptions on which these objections are based, then none of these claims could be construed as a criticism.

A final comment: the two sides' arguments miss each other in the way I have indicated because neither makes explicit why it holds that art must be defined the one way as opposed to the other - functionally or procedurally. The fundamental disagreement rarely is aired, so that in practice the debate starts not from common ground, but from assumptions which the other side regards already as questionable. Under such circumstances one might frustratedly conclude that these differing points of view are incommensurable and that there is no wider perspective from which we might judge between them; or one might fall into line with Weitzian anti-essentialists who dismiss as irrelevant and misguided any search for a definition of art. Nevertheless, my own view is that, deep and basic though the disagreement might be, it is a disagreement on which fruitfully critical discussion is possible. I believe that we might determine by argument which of the functional and procedural approaches to art's definition more correctly captures the concept's core. This, though, is not the place to embark upon so grand a project!

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NOTES:

1. Monroe C. Beardsley is an example of a functionalist on art's definition - see especially 'In Defence of Aesthetic Value', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 52 (1979): 723-749; 'Redefining Art', in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, ed Michael J. WREEN & Donald M. CALLEN, (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1982), 298-315; 'An Aesthetic Definition of Art' in *What Is Art?* ed H. CURTLER, (New York, 1983), 15-29. Other recent versions of the position can be found in George Schlesinger, 'Aesthetic Experience and the Definition of Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19 (1979): 167-176; William Tolhurst, 'Towards an Aesthetic Account of the Nature of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42 (1984): 261-269; and P. N. Humble, 'The Philosophical Challenge of Avant-garde Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (1984): 24, 119-128. For a discussion of Tolhurst's views see No. 1 Carroll, 'Art and Interaction', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 45 (1986): 57-68 and Bohdan Dziemidok, 'Controversy about the Aesthetic Nature of Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28 (1988): 1-17. For a discussion of Schlesinger's position see Douglas Dempster, 'Aesthetic Experience and Psychological Definitions of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1985): 153-165.

George Dickie is an example of a proceduralist - see especially *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1974) and *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*, (New York: Haven Publications, 1984). For a recent critique of Dickie's views see Stephen Davies, 'A

Defence of the Institutional Definition of Art', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 36 (1988): 307-324.

2. I take Ben Tilghman to be one such - see *But Is It Art?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

3. Amongst those who hold that art is an inescapably evaluative notion are Stephen C. Pepper, 'Evaluating Definitions in Art and their Sanctions', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 21 (1962): 201-208; Cyril Barrett, 'Are Bad Works of Art 'Works of Art'?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*, 6 (1973): 182-193; Robert McGregor, 'Art - Again', *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1979): 713-723.

4. Harold Osborne, 'Definition and Evaluation in Aesthetics', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 23 (1973): 15-27.

5. Tilghman, *op cit.*

6. Dickie, *The Art Circle*, see 85-86.

7. Monroe C. Beardsley, 'Is Art Essentially Institutional?', in *The Aesthetic Point of View*, *op cit.*, 125-145; Schelsinger *op cit.*; Terry Diffey, 'On Defining Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19 (1979): 15-23; Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, Edition Two, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980), 157-166; Harold Osborne, 'What is a Work of Art?', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 21 (1981): 3-11.

8. Ted Cohen, 'The Possibility of Art: Remarks on a Proposal by Dickie', *The Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973): 69-82; Anita Silvers, 'The Artworld Discarded', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34 (1976): 441-454; Humble, *op cit.*

9. Bruce N. Morton, 'Review of Aesthetics: An Introduction', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 32 (1973): 115-118; Beardsley, *op cit.*; Richard Shusterman, 'Analytic Aesthetics: Retrospect and Prospect', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46, *Analytic Aesthetics*, (1987): 115-124.