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"WHAT IS ART?": QUESTIONS (AND ANSWERS) ABOUT THE QUESTION

Contemporary writers on aesthetics have quarrelled with it and have hedged it with qualifications; but the single issue on which they still take aim is the question "What is art?" I want to outline some of the principal questions asked about (usually against) this larger question. The point of the outline is to show that whatever happens eventually to the larger question, certain questions *about it* have answers; at least so far, the question "What is art?" is philosophically alive and well — and, in effect, undiminished.

Question I: 'Is art — both the concept and the objects — not nominal? And should not the question read, then, not "What *is* art?" — but (Germanicized) "What is *called* art?" Thus, George Dickie¹ holds the objects of art to obtain and preserve their identity as a matter of social convention. The question of what they are should then be directed, it seems, to the folk-lorist or the historian of popular customs (including language). Perhaps the philosopher retains a distinctive function in this process — but it can only appear after the other work has been done.

As truth is measured, there is evidently a measure here. It is clear that the concept of art itself has evolved: alien to the Greeks, intimated in the Renaissance, full grown in the Enlightenment. And perhaps, on the Hegelian prophecy, we shall yet read (or write) its obituaries. Furthermore, in some measure, the *appearances* of art are also conventional; the objects themselves have been various and varying. It is easy enough to imagine a polite but perplexed audience saying of the first novel: "It *is* quite nice — but is it art?"

We could, of course, without altering its force, make the same point about the conventional applications of terms for any except a few and unusual appearances of language. Language, after all, has a

¹ G. Dickie, "Defining Art," *American Philological Quarterly*, VI (1969), pp. 253-256.

large number — and none of them *necessary* — of histories. Yet: *are* the questions "What is art?" and "What is called art?" synonymous? The danger in defending the reduction is clear and present: that we may construe the ascriptions of the term "art" not only as conventional but as arbitrary; that the very concept may be assumed to stand on no other base than an agreement — a *mere* agreement — to apply it.

But there is no reason to leave such an assumption untested; there *is* contrary evidence, and some of it both obvious and transparent. The methodological implausibilities aside — the presumptions that 'society' agrees on this point or any other; that we know the substance of this agreement — one datum will not easily be explained away: that language, and in its turn, "art," are functional. We may wish to view it as conventional; but this only initiates a further question "Why the conventions?" The latter is another way of putting the question "What is art?" — and of *not* putting the question "What is called art?"

Question II: 'Does the question "What is art?" not assume an answer for which art is one thing? but not (as it may be) a class or variety of things?' The answer to *this* question is designed to evoke either a "yes" or a "no." In either event, the question about which it asks is meaningful as a question — and in either event, the answer arrived at in confronting the question, itself provides evidence as to *how* the question means. In either event, the original question hardly fixes the quantity of its answer. If the answer given *were* that art is one thing (e.g., "expression"), we may still ask (1) whether this distinguishes art from other processes or products; and (2) whether the one "thing" indeed covers the facts of art. If the answers to these questions are "yes," then we have settled something, first, about art and, only second, about the question "What is art?"; if they are "no," then we have still settled something about art (what it is not), and only left open to the question the possibility that art may yet be a class or variety of things. (The choice is not exclusive since art might, after all, be otherwise, nothing at all.)

Much of the criticism directed against asking the question "What is art?" is made in the name of therapy for the so-called Proper-Name Fallacy in which it is held that the existence of a proper name implies the existence of a single object or quality designated by it. Perhaps the question "What is art?" does make such an assumption — but, like others, that assumption either has a basis or does not. And as we have seen, we will know whether it does or not, in the case of art, by (and only by) asking (and attempting to answer) the question.

This qualification is the more important because the alternatives suggested in most versions of the Fallacy — namely that art (since it is not one thing) is a class of properties or things, or a variety of properties or things — seem finally to come very close to the same “thing.” If we maintain that art is a class concept, unless we also establish an arbitrary theory of types, we still regard art as singular: the fact that it must be characterized by common properties P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots rather than only by P_1 makes a substantive difference, but not a formal one.

Nor do two other recent and subtler attempts to evade this constraint manage it any more successfully. Weitz² suggests that “What is art?” is a significant question only if we conceive of the many different and different kinds of objects of art as bearing a family resemblance to each other; the objects of art do not share *all* of a certain group of properties: some objects share some properties, and others, others. The concept of art, then, is the concept of a particular family resemblance.

To say this much, however, is also to reveal a significant relation between the concept of family resemblance and the concept of class: unless family resemblance is ascribed to members of a *particular* family, the concept, it seems, remains sterile: it might be useful to know the points of family resemblance among all objects (qua objects), but this would tell us nothing (in particular) about art. To have found or ascribed a family resemblance with respect to objects of art assumes that we have first circumscribed the family: *it* provides a home and hearth — or at least a family circle. Different objects of art, then, might have only a fraction of the total number of properties in terms of which “family resemblance” is traced; but those properties *as a group* are enumerable and enumerated — or else they are orphans, resemblances without a family.

Richard Wollheim, in *Art and Its Objects*, tries a more sophisticated strategy. Art, he suggests, is an “intransitive” concept. That is, it is subject only to ostensive definition; there is no way of translating the term into other terms. Like the term “peculiar” in “there’s a peculiar smell in the room,” one can finally — if asked “What smell?” — only hope that the questioner will be able to smell it. Explanations soon run short. And so, with the assertion for any x , that “ x is art,” and the question which evokes it.

² M. Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *J. of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1956), pp. 27-35.

Cf. also, W. E. Kennick, “Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind* (1958), pp. 317-334.

It turns out, however, that to attribute this characteristic to certain types of statements does not in itself deny that a class concept in *some* sense is at work when one faces the question “What is art?” When one asks “What smell?” one presupposes an understanding (and sense) of what counts (or not) as a smell; it is the form of the latter question which operates also when we ask “What is art?” If we draw somebody’s attention to a fine novel, we might hope that he would regard this as a recommendation to read it and not to use it as a window prop. But we could only hope this — for ourselves and for him — if we placed prior to this particular presentation a conception of legitimate and illegitimate (or at least of productive and nonproductive) ways of addressing art; and in turn, it seems, a conception of art itself.

Suppose that we take the most extreme alternative account — that art is a simple variety of things unrelated either by common properties (as members of a class) *or* by family resemblance. Two consequences follow: (1) the question “What is art?” would arise arbitrarily or whimsically: it could have no purpose or point, and of course, no answer; (2) the presupposition in asking the question (and it probably would not be asked) reflects an odd set of empirical grounds: i.e., that among the objects ordinarily called objects of art, there is no connection — or at least none worth mentioning. Even on this last count, moreover, the question “What is art?” still has empirical contact — if only in the denial that art is anything at all. It does not matter, then, what presupposition one makes about the character or quantity of its answer. To argue the contrary, it turns out, is only a version of *ad hominem* abuse — an accusation that the person asking the question has already made up his mind about the answer and will not change it. Like most *ad hominem*s, this one may be effective as invective — but it is indifferent as logic. We may lose *time*, if we were guilty as charged, but not — so long as we are able to see what we do not want to see — sense.

Question III. ‘Does the question “What is art?” not assume the existence of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions by means of which we are to determine (leaving no questions open) what is and what is not art?’³ It is easy to confuse the logical thrust of this question with certain of the applications of “art” in fact. Perhaps, one may admit for the sake of argument, certain figures in the history of aesthetics *have* set themselves the task of establishing necessary and

³ M. Weitz, *Ibid.*; cf. also, W. B. Gallie, “Art as an Essentially Contested Concept,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (1956), pp. 97-114.

sufficient conditions for art (although the names most often cited for the practice — Kant, Hegel, Croce — seem quite innocent of it.)

Even if some writers *were* guilty, however, the fact that they took the question in one sense does not mean that it is the only way in which the question can be (or has been) understood. Common sense, in fact, argues for another interpretation; there are few events or qualities or practices about which we ordinarily ask the question “what is x” in the hope of uncovering necessary and sufficient conditions. “What is a table?” we may ask; “What is war?” “What is the genre of the novel?” “What is pleasure?” And for all of them we would probably be satisfied (even in prospect) with something less than a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; certainly we would agree that an illuminating answer could be given without meeting such conditions. The terms or concepts for which we ordinarily do require those conditions, furthermore, are few and of a special variety. If we ask what a square is, we may reasonably insist on knowing its necessary and sufficient conditions — and so for “bachelors” and for “marigolds.” But these, and even the many terms like them, do not take us very far. If we had to wait on necessary and sufficient conditions before we could use a term (or ask a question about it), the silence might not be unbroken, but it could as well be. We would agree, of course, that when we ask “what is x” we would *like* as complete an answer as is possible; and necessary and sufficient conditions (together) seem to epitomize that possibility. But fancies of course give way before the stringencies of what is possible.

What shall we say then about the conditions we *do* seek? Are they “necessary” but not “sufficient” — or the other way round? It turns out in practice that for most of the instances when we ask “What is x?” we are willing to settle for *either* sufficient or necessary conditions — although even then, often, as a pious hope. The question “What is art?” then, if it asks after the common basis in the objects of art for what we call art, is at least not an extraordinary question; nor does it commit us to either looking for or finding necessary or sufficient conditions. In asking it, furthermore, we are not (at least not necessarily) closing the concept or class: to state one or more conditions is to leave open the possibility that there are others; we may also, by attaching a temporal parameter, stipulate that the conditions identified at a given time refer to that time and thus, not irretrievably. None of these qualifications impugns the question itself or denies that the question concerns things other than mere conventions; their implication is quite to the contrary.

Question IV: We might want to suggest that even if "What is art?" were admitted in the face of all other objections, still, it begs another question: to ask what art is, assumes (in whatever of its senses) *that* it is. Furthermore, there is a strikingly close relation between the evidence that would be required for answering the question "What is art?" and for establishing *that* there is such a thing as art. Must we not (in other words) have an answer to the question "What is art?" before we can ask it?⁴ Otherwise, we might ask, whence and whither the question? that is, what are we asking it about? And where do we look for an answer?

It is no response to this question to say that if aesthetics is one, there are others as well — that ethics, political philosophy, the philosophy of science are open to analogous objections. But we learn something from the analogies, perhaps about philosophy as an enterprise and, more assuredly, about aesthetics. The task implicitly assigned it by way of the objection seems the unlikely one of picking itself up by its own bootstraps — and it *would* be this if the boots and straps and we, picking ourselves up, were given and clearly, to begin with. But they are not. If we consider the question of why anyone would come to ask the question "What is art?" (whatever mistakes are committed in the asking), the datum from which it starts seems evident: an inkling, an intimation of a distinction among the objects or qualities of experience.

This latter comment appears as an historico-psychological comment, although without the availability of instruments of demonstration. But the principle is a general one: why, after all, *any* distinctions? — and so, too, one might assume, the distinction between art and whatever is not. The beginnings surely are opaque, indistinct, a sense only that with some objects or experiences (of art), we encounter a difference from others. Like other intuitions or inchoate sensations, this one may vanish under examination; or we might decide that whatever is there is not worth the effort of further distinction; or we might, pursuing its connections and disjunctions, find in it, as against these negative possibilities, an important datum for a typology of experience or phenomenology of man. Something, at any rate, will be clearer — but only once the question, and whatever it does presuppose, are articulated.

The question "What is art?" then, is in some respects problematic: we do not (and cannot) know beforehand if it is worth the asking,

and we do not (and cannot) know where an answer to it may lead. In this guise, however, it is but one of a large number of philosophical questions. What is *not* problematic, is the question as question.

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