

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
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**BONUS:** Can art be defined?

Last time ended with some confusion that I wanted to clarify. As I said before, Weitz offers 2 arguments—a general and a specific argument—for the conclusion that art cannot be defined. We need to get clear about the nature, and soundness, of this second argument. I also said that I think there's a tension between the two arguments, and I want to defend that claim as well.

General Argument: There's not much to say here. Weitz claims that every concept besides those of mathematics and logic is an open concept. So, the concept of art is an open concept as well. This means that classificatory decisions will have to be made as new cases arise, and art cannot be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Specific Argument: Weitz seems to offer a second argument for the conclusion that art is an open concept. This argument appeals to features that are supposed to be distinctive of art (if not unique to art). Here's the relevant passage, from p. 16:

“What I am arguing, then, is that the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties. We can, of course, choose to close the concept. But to do this with “art” or “tragedy” or “portraiture”, etc., is ludicrous since it forecloses on the very conditions of creativity in the arts.”

Weitz refers to an alleged property of art as supporting the conclusion that art is indefinable. This alleged property is something like the following: Art must always allow for adventurousness, expansion, and creativity. This is an explicit premise in his argument. The conclusion of the argument is: Art cannot be defined (it is an open concept). There is also a connecting premise regarding how definition (or “closing a concept”) thwarts the creativity that is supposed to be essential to art.

Here's a plausible way (the most plausible way, it seems to me) of formalizing the argument:

- P1. Art must always allow for adventurousness, expansion, creativity, etc.
- P2. Definition (or “closing a concept”) rules out adventurousness, expansion, creativity, etc. (At least, definition rules out the adventurousness, etc. that is distinctive of art.)
- C. So, art cannot be defined. Art is an open concept.

The argument appears valid (so long as no equivocation occurs). So, let's examine the premises. Then, let's see how this argument relates to the General Argument.

P1 does seem to point out a distinctive property of art. Artists can be creative in the type of art they produce within a medium, and they can also be creative in adopting new media. An example of the former category: artists creatively transitioned from representational painting to non-representational painting. An example of the latter category: utilizing electronics and computer technology to create music. P1, as I am interpreting it, claims that art must always allow for the possibility of future revolutions

of these 2 kinds (or, at least one of them). P1 seems true—but does this mean that art is indefinable?

That depends on the truth of P2. The idea seems to be that in closing a concept some defining properties are specified as necessary (and sufficient) for art. (These properties might be specified by a disjunction.) This would rule out the possibility of art that lacks these properties. But the adventurousness, etc. of art consists in artistic revolutions in which the old artistic standards (i.e., alleged defining properties) are not met, but art is still produced. Definition does not allow for adventurousness, etc. in this sense.

Here's an objection to P2: The advocate of P2 seems to be thinking of definition as listing certain properties that are salient in past artworks (e.g., representation, expression, significant form, etc.). But, this is a limited way of thinking of definition. A definition of art does not have to list such properties, but can provide a formula whereby such properties are generated (including the adventurous new ones!). Compare our original argument with the following:

- P1. The United States of America always allows for expansion. (For example, new states can be, and have been, admitted to the Union.)
- P2. A definition of the United States of America would rule out expansion by saying that such-and-such, and nothing else, is the United States of America.
- C. So, the United States of America cannot be defined.

P2 of this argument is flawed. A definition of the United States of America that simply listed the 50 states would be a flawed definition. (Just as a definition of art that simply listed the current forms of art would be flawed.) This is because the United States of America can expand. But, we can define the United States of America to capture this fact. E.g., we can define the United States of America as, say, the current 50 states plus any new territory that passes the Constitutional formula for statehood. Art could similarly be expansive while having a formula for arthood. (Some have taken this kind of comparison very seriously, holding that art is just whatever some institution decrees to be art. This view allows for great creativity and expansion, while also defining art.)

A similar objection is made by Davies, p. 66:

“After all, that it is made by a creative person might be a part of the essence of an artwork, might be something mentioned in its definition. How could such a definition foreclose on future creativity, since it does not tell artists what to do, although it insists that, whatever they do, they do it creatively?”

Note that we can deny the Specific Argument, while still accepting the conclusion. If so, we simply think that the conclusion doesn't follow for this reason.

I also still think that there is a tension between the 2 arguments. The Specific Argument claims that art must be an open concept in order to allow for the adventurousness, expansion, and creativity that is *distinctive* of art. It seems that being an open concept, all by itself, is supposed to permit such expansion. But then if the General Argument is also sound, and almost every concept is open, almost every concept permits such expansion. Art no longer is distinctive in this regard.