

# Epistemological Humility in Art Theory

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## I. Introduction

Defining art is both an important and difficult task. The history of aesthetics is filled with accepted then rejected theories that attempted to define art. In this paper, I will argue that the development of an all-inclusive and comprehensive theory of art is impossible due to our epistemic limitations as finite beings. In order to prove this thesis, I will (1) Evaluate the meaning of art through the lens of art history; (2) Present and refute the foundationalist approaches to art; (3) Analyze the nature of essentialism with respect to art; and (4) Offer a postmodern perspective that resolves the difficulties inherent to historical, foundational, and essential theories of art.

## II. Historical Inquiry

A brief foray into the history of art will show that various art theories have failed to define the nature of art. Though no consensus about the merit of these theories has emerged, it is useful to examine several key theories in order to identify paths that have been explored, however unsuccessful. I will examine Representationalism and Expressionism beginning with the Representationalist account of art.

### A. Representationalism

The idea of art as imitation (*mimesis*) originates in ancient Greek thought. Plato pursued the theory that “painting [is] analogous to pointing a mirror toward things.”<sup>1</sup> In this theory,

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 20.

representation of some idealistic or abstract concept or reality is taken to be the essential condition for art. If something is art, then it necessarily requires representation or imitation. Paintings, sculptures, and compositions are direct reflections of real objects. For example, the representationalist would argue that a Greek *Kouros* statue of a youthful male is art because it represents the god Apollo.

This view of art remained constant until modern periods of art (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), from which the diversity of art grew explosively. As abstraction increased within artworks, “the development of nonrepresentational art in the nineteenth and twentieth century rendered the representational theory of art obsolete, while also alerting theorists to the fact that it had never really been fully comprehensive.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Romanticism, painters, sculptors, and composers turned inward and attempted to express inner feeling and subjective impressions. The works that emerged during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century exposed representationalism’s inadequacy as an art theory. It became increasingly difficult to articulate where the representation lies in artworks.

An additional challenge to representational theories of art include works such as John Cage’s “4:33” in which he stands motionless and silent on a concert hall stage for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Neither he nor an orchestra creates music. Representation is arguably nonexistent in this composition simply because music is not performed. Another counterexample to Representationalism is Piet Mondrain’s *Composition with Yellow, Blue, Red* in which horizontal and vertical black lines are placed on a white plane with yellow, blue, and red filled-in boxes. Once again, any trace of representation or imitation is difficult to discern or locate in this abstract

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<sup>2</sup> Carroll, 55-56.

painting. The solid, rigid structure of the work does not imitate a worldly or life-like scene, occurrence, or concept.

## B. Expressionism

The theory of Expressionism holds that the expression of emotion is the essential quality of art. An artist will seek to transmit a particular emotion to a work of art as he or she is creating. This emotion is then transferred to the audience when they view or experience the artwork. For example, Michelangelo's *Pietà* expresses the intense anguish that Mary experiences over the death of Christ. The expressionist would define this piece as art because anguish (the emotion invested by Michelangelo) is conveyed to the audience.

Expression is met with challenges once modern art (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) is also taken into consideration. Within the past century, it is obvious that "much art is expressive, but it is not the case that all art is expressive of emotion. A great deal of twentieth-century art is preoccupied with ideas, rather than emotions."<sup>3</sup> Unlike the specific set of emotions that are conveyed by the expressionist, art can be expressive of vague and ambiguous emotion (as in extremely abstract or unnatural works). However, ideas cannot be added to the expressionist's definition because things like mathematical formulas and other "idea-transmitting" concepts would be considered art, which is problematic.

There are several examples of art that undermine the expressionist theories of art. For example, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* is unclear as to what it expresses. A light-brown colored abstract entity appears to be in movement against a dark background. In such abstraction, a possible unified set of emotions brought about by Duchamp seems to be unlikely and nonexistent. Furthermore, Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* presents a different problem. Warhol arranges 32 canvases depicting Campbell soup cans in a 4 by 8 pattern. There

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<sup>3</sup> Carroll, 105.

is absolutely no transfer of emotion intended by Warhol. Reception or discovery of a particular emotion is not required for the image to qualify as art.

### C. Further Remarks

The representationalist or expressionist may argue that the examples mentioned above are not art. In this case, artists such as Mondrain and Duchamp fail to satisfy the requirements in creating art objects. However, this is problematic because the art world has adopted the aforementioned works as art. In denying art-status to these works, the strict representationalist or expressionist becomes hostile to our art tradition and history.

Both representational and expressionist accounts of art fall short in their elevation of one essential feature of art over others. A brief survey into art history shows that “in spite of the many theories, we seem no nearer to our goal today than we were in Plato’s time.”<sup>4</sup> In each theory, many examples show that art objects are diverse and multi-faceted. Though representation and expression are important characteristics of many artworks within our tradition, it does not necessarily follow that they provide sufficient grounding for a complete theory. Overall, a historical inquiry concerning art definitions argues against the possibility of a comprehensive art theory.

### III. Foundationalism

A foundationalist approach to epistemology has several characteristics. In order to establish a concrete basis for knowledge, one must build a philosophy upon premises of which one is absolutely certain. Further premises are then be derived from these foundational premises. For example, a foundationalist approach to a philosophy of science might establish that experimentation is the building block upon which theories are validated or disproven. The

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<sup>4</sup> Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (September 1956), 27.

foundation of experimentation would be argued to be indubitable as further premises (scientific advances, discoveries, theories, etc.) derive their validity and grounding from the foundation.

#### A. Correlation between foundationalism and art theory

The quest to articulate essential aspects of art is analogous to the search for a foundational premise. In developing different art theories, the aesthetician seeks foundational elements of art, elements that are necessary. She seeks to examine and test supposed theories to ensure that they are both valid and sound. From there, a philosophy of art is developed from this essential element. This foundationalism is an epistemological approach that “insists on the need for and ultimate primacy of absolutely certain, infeasible, crystalline truths, totally beyond any possibility of invalidation.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the aesthetician’s foundational element of art must be indubitably valid.

For example, suppose after much research and field study, our aesthetician concludes that aesthetic experience is the fundamental essence of art. Following her thesis, she might choose to focus on the contemplative state that art spurs an audience into. To her, the aesthetic experience is a foundational property art from which her entire aesthetic philosophy derives its validity. Aesthetic experience provides the sufficient grounding in this foundationalist epistemology. However, I will argue that this approach proves to be problematic.

#### B. Self-contradictory nature of foundationalism

A foundational approach to art must be clear and self-evident, and also content-rich as the weight of the entire theory rests upon this primary foundation. In the hypothetical case of our aesthetician favoring experience, aesthetic experience must be necessary for any and all cases of art (both past and future). The property of aesthetic experience must be unambiguous and

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Epistemology: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 93.

understandable as well as all-inclusive and universally applicable. However, these qualities are incongruous. For a foundational premise, “fullness of content and probative security obviously stand in mutual conflict with each other.”<sup>6</sup> This generates a significant problem for the foundationalist’s approach to epistemology. The foundational premise must be incredibly rich in substance, but yet also indubitable. The coexistence of such opposing principles creates absurdity.

Furthermore, art is a vast and evolving practice. Future artworks may be unrecognizable for today’s viewer as change is unpredictable and artistic revolutions cannot be tamed into submission by human efforts through definitions and theorizing. For example, Duchamp’s *Fountain* (a signed urinal) is wholly different from Goya’s *The Second of May, 1808* and other Romantic works created in the early 1800s. The discovery of a common characteristic that is both self-evident and indubitable is both improbable and unnecessary. An essential definition and theory of art would need to explain the entire art world, but yet be inconceivably safe and secure.

In light of developments within contemporary philosophy of art, foundationalism is not a viable option for aestheticians seeking to define art. This collapse of foundationalism exposes flaws with essential art theory’s pursuit for foundational or essential aspects of art.

#### **IV. Essentialism and the Openness of Art**

In addition to the provided arguments concerning art history and foundationalism, I will argue that the idea of an all-inclusive theory of art is misguided. In seeking a theory that accounts for all art objects of the world, the art theorist aims to discover an essential property of art. She looks to find a characteristic that is not only universal to every instance and occurrence of art, but is fundamental to the art’s ontic nature.

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<sup>6</sup> Rescher, 129.

### A. The Essentialist's Argument

The essentialist's argument will be articulated as follows:

1. If something possesses characteristic  $\alpha$ , then it is art
  2.  $\beta$  possesses characteristic  $\alpha$
- Therefore  $\beta$  is art

The essentialist's argument has a perfectly valid form; its conclusion follows from its premises.

However, in order to refute the essentialist I will challenge and repudiate the first premise.

### B. Epistemological Instability

Weitz defines an open concept as that which “its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible.”<sup>7</sup> An open concept has the characteristic of being able to be continually altered and revised. By this definition, it is evident that “‘art,’ itself, is an open concept. New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise.”<sup>8</sup> As articulated in the historical inquiry, art is continually changing as new styles and trends materialize in the artworld. Therefore, the idea of all art objects possessing one common characteristic is epistemologically unstable. It seeks to locate an essential property of art that articulates its essence. But our epistemological limitations as humans, diversity of art objects, and openness of art compel us to recognize that no such common property exists.

For example, after examining the entire human race, a biological anthropologist notices that humans are not over ten feet tall. This discovery of the property comes from examining fellow humans, historical data, and biological limitations of the species *Homo sapiens*. The property of “not being over ten feet tall” is universal to all humanity. However, it does not necessarily follow that this universal property is an essential property of humans. One can easily imagine a human being greater than ten feet tall. In contrast to universal properties, which are simply discovered ostensibly, essential properties must be fundamental to a subject's essence.

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<sup>7</sup> Weitz, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 32.

### C. Epistemological Failure

Imagine every known case of created art in existence is examined by a super-committee of artists, historians, and philosophers. After much debate and intense study, a common characteristic is found in every case. Though this characteristic is universal to all the art in the study, it does not follow that it is an essential property of art. For the super-committee would have simply identified a property universal to the collection of works examined. Therefore, the property cannot provide sufficient grounds for the essentialist's ideal definition. This can be concluded because the theory would not account for future artworks, could also be likened to the aforesaid "ten foot tall human being" example, and pursues the fallacy of incorrectly defining a universal property as an essential one.

As finite beings, "we must invent the ontologies we need, much as we invent our mathematics, seeking only to make them plausible and coherent and serviceable for our best analyses."<sup>9</sup> Unbeknownst to us, artworks could potentially possess essential characteristics. However, as with mathematic concepts, art is subject to and conceptualized within human minds. Supposed essential qualities might actually be definitions that simply cohere with our existing thoughts and beliefs.

An essential property of art is impossible to identify because of the limits of human knowledge and the vast diversity and openness of art objects. Art theorists may articulate a "similarity [of] conditions but never necessary and sufficient ones for the correct application of [art]."<sup>10</sup> Universal or similar properties can be attributed to art with relative ease (i.e. representation, expression), but it does not follow that these properties are essential and

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Margolis, "The Deviant Ontology of Artworks" in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noel Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press), 111-112.

<sup>10</sup> Weitz, 32.



necessary to the ontology or epistemology of art. Ultimately, art as an open concept is incompatible with essentialism.

## V. Contemporary Philosophy and Concluding Remarks

Jean-Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern state of philosophy as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”<sup>11</sup> Modern-era philosophical systems sought to use philosophy as a tool to discover, develop, and eventually articulate an absolute and universal model of truth. This all-encompassing theory is called a metanarrative. In postmodern thought, Lyotard calls for society to be wary and hesitant to embrace such endeavors. This approach calls for epistemic humility—something that the modernists did not fully realize. For example, Leibniz’s *Monadology* proposes an extravagant metaphysical view of reality’s true essence. Instead of attempting to develop essentialist definitions or ultimate metaphysical reality (as in Leibnizian philosophy), postmodern thinkers realize that human reason and knowledge are limited and relationally constituted. Our philosophizing is tainted with prejudices and oftentimes proves inadequate in its attempts to grasp hold of reality in and of itself. We are unable to divorce ourselves from the fetters of cultural biases and beliefs. Though we can locate constraints on our rationality, a completely unbiased philosophy is unattainable.

### A. Incredulity to Art Theory

This postmodern shift away from metanarrative to local, plural narrative is applicable to art and art theory. As the essentialists attempt to articulate and legitimize their theories, they seek to capture the absolute essence of art. Their *telos* is aimed at a universal, all-encompassing truth about art objects. Moreover, one could argue that this pursuit is grounded in metanarrative. Essentially, essential art theory yearns to grasp hold of a fixed absolute truth about art to unify

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), xxiv.

art objects. However, it ultimately yields no fruit as an approach as its narrow view of art generates skepticism about essentialism and art.

## B. Nature of Experience

Art objects can inspire in viewers or audiences a deep state of contemplation, euphoria, or transcendence. The effect of a beautiful composition or sculpture is seemingly inexplicable or indefinable. Even avant-garde or unorthodox works move audiences into reflection and introspection. The deviant definition of art throughout art history and the problematic foundationalist and essentialist approaches to art theory result in incredulity towards attempted ontological and epistemological views of art. The ineffability of sublime experiences stands in contradiction to the *telos* of such endeavors.

The act of seeking an essence of artwork results in insurmountable difficulties. Lyotard argues that the question for artists and audiences is “no longer ‘How does one make a work of art?’, but ‘What is it to experience an effect proper to art?’”<sup>12</sup> What Lyotard favors is not inquiry into the essence of art, but an awareness of how art influences us. There must be a focus of the receiver-side of the artist-art-audience trichotomy. The artist and audience are humans that engage in and experience something that is indescribable. Regardless of what the true purpose or drive behind art is there must be a focus on what is readily available and obvious to humankind: human experience.

## C. Conclusion

After examining the historical progression of theories, the collapse of foundationalism, and the impossibility of discovering essential qualities of art, the possibility of an exhaustive definition of art is met with much skepticism. Perhaps the incredulity that Lyotard speaks of

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 458.

derives much of its grounding from aspects such as these. The self-proclaimed confidence in such art theories grounded in metanarrative is both faulty and epistemologically boastful. A possible alternative to this failure of art theory might be a revitalization of human experience of the ineffable world of art.

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