

Stephen Davies

Philosophical Perspectives on Art.

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Basic issues in the philosophy of art, Stephen Davies tells us, include identifying what it is that marks off works of art from other kinds of thing, and explaining the nature of our understanding of these special kinds of entity. The sixteen chapters of this book are divided into two parts that reflect these concerns. All of the chapters were published earlier as essays, but have been revisited prior to their assemblage in this collection, and at least some have been reworked, one gathers, from Davies' expression of gratitude to colleagues that provided 'helpful advice as [he] wrote chapters of this book' (19). The collected essays are complex and heterogeneous enough to prohibit summarizing them, or even listing their salient points, in the restricted space of a standard review. Accordingly, I single out some main ideas of this book, and provide some comment when it seems warranted. I do the latter not to be argumentative, but to show the extent to which this book provides fertile ground for rational dialogue. The interested reader can, in any case, refer to the introduction to the book where Davies has presented a fine overview of central concerns of the work. (About a third of the introduction appears on Amazon.com.)

Davies identifies certain distinctions that are essential for philosophers of art to recognize, such as that between real and nominal essence. Whereas we humans create our lexicon of concepts—a dictionary of ideas that are determined in part by human needs and interests in addition to the fact and nature of independent reality—our conceptual vocabulary can be divided into one part that pertains to the character and structure of physical reality as we understand it, and another part whose province is entities that are cultural. Entities of the latter, but not the former, kind depend on us for their nature and identity—no humans no culture—and reflect certain of our interests, intentions, and values (24, 25). Any talk of real essence must pertain to something that is a natural kind or that is real in the sense that it is not a human creation, such as water, while nominal essence pertains to those entities, such as artworks, that are humanly created.

Although art is a cultural entity, Davies cautions us that 'we should not be too quick to conclude from the dependence of art on human interests and perceptual modes that it does not have an objective nature independent of its role in human experience' (26). The sense in which art might be thought to be objective, even if it is humanly invented, is if 'it is not merely a contingent fabrication with no content or constraints [but]...is imposed on and is to some extent answerable to natural categories,' and thus 'is not purely or solely dependent for its nature on arbitrary, variable, [and] mutable human conventions' (26). Thus, although art's relation to human intention, experience, and understanding make it a cultural artifact that is distinct from nature, the possibilities of art are nevertheless restricted by 'categories found in nature' (2), and both the universality of art—on the view that it is found in all cultures—and the universal identification of

aesthetic properties would be objective in virtue of their relation to biological humanity. (Not all anthropologists agree that art as we know it in the West is found in all cultures [53]. Reasons for thinking this as well as Davies' opposition to this view are given in Chapter 4. Art and evolution are the focus of Chapter 7, where Ellen Dissanayake's evolutionary aesthetic is outlined and critically examined.)

The previous points invite the following comments. First, the slippery notion of objectivity may apply to certain aspects of culture in addition to nature, and the influence of social institutions on making, apprehending, and constraining art seems as important to recognize today as biology. Accordingly, art and our reactions to it result from genetic potential interacting with environment, and each is a partner in creating the objectivity of this special artificial kind. While the preceding points amplify rather than contradict what Davies offers as criteria of objectivity for artificial kinds, recognition of them means that speaking of the objectivity of art is not a simple and straightforward matter, and that the different kinds of objectivity noted, and their relations to humans and their institutions, may have an effect on how we think about art's nominal essence. Further, it may be fruitful to model the objectivity of art on Karl Popper's World 3 artifacts of culture that are effects of human invention, but about which we nevertheless discover certain things after their invention—things that, once discovered, can be commonly recognized, and are objective in that sense. Second, it is not clear that all of those things that both allow for and constrain the possibilities of making and apprehending works of art are 'natural categories'. For instance, because each artwork must have a comprehensible identity—that is, it must be possible to understand with which object or objects a work of art is meant to be identified—having to have an identity is something that constrains what artists can do. It is not clear, however, that this constraint is natural rather than philosophically unavoidable.

Davies looks at functional and procedural definitions of art, not in an attempt to decide between them, but to make explicit how the differing presuppositions underlying these definitions involve differing conceptions of art (43). For the functionalist, the definition of art must reflect art's ability to provide aesthetic experience. This kind of experience is 'valued for the enjoyment to which it gives rise' (44), and anything that fails to provide for this distinctive kind of experience cannot be a work of art. For the proceduralist, however, a non-aesthetic artwork is not a contradiction in terms. Rather, an artwork is just something that some person or institution, with the authority to christen or recognize that artwork as such, so christens or recognizes it. Could functionalism and proceduralism be complementary, so that 'in many respects art is importantly functional and that, in other respects, art is importantly conventional/procedural /institutional' (44)? Not according to Davies. The reason is that the procedures according to which art status is established may exhaust the respects in which something is art, and, if that is the case, then there are no respects left to fit the functionalist's requirement of providing for the possibility of aesthetic experience. Davies here references Duchamp's readymades (45, 46) that were chosen because of their lack of aesthetic properties as preexistent quotidian objects. However, Davies does not consider that such objects may acquire aesthetic properties in virtue of how they fit and function in relation to art history. That is, the value that such works have in virtue of which they become art historically important may

be thought to be aesthetic value in virtue of that importance. And since understanding how such artworks fit and function in art history would be a matter of the intellect, their aesthetic value would be conceptual to the extent to which what is understood is thought to be pleasurable in being interesting and important.

Davies says that ‘aesthetic properties [are]...not *essential* for something’s being art’ (62, his italics). He also maintains that ‘conceptual pieces not possessing *perceptible* aesthetic attributes can qualify as art and also that ordinary objects might be appropriated to the artworld, as Duchamp’s readymades were, so that their being art does not depend on the aesthetic properties they happen to *display*’ (62, both italics mine). On the same page he says that ‘it could be that art practices change over time so that the emphasis falls on the creation of theory-dependent, historically conditioned artistic properties that have little to do with aesthetic properties as they were traditionally described.’ Although the emphasis in the preceding quotes is on a perceptual aesthetic, one cannot rule out that Davies would accept that some works may have—perhaps even exclusively—an intellectual aesthetic. But it is not clear that non-perceptual Conceptual artworks satisfy the functionalist’s requirement of being aesthetic, and it may be that Davies thinks that they qualify as art only according to the proceduralist’s requirement that they are recognized as art by the artworld. That is rather what one would infer from the previous quotes and from his contention that ‘Duchamp’s readymades were dedicated to exposing the irrelevance of aesthetic properties, as traditionally conceived, to an artwork’s status or interest’ (121). And there is no suggestion that artworks lacking traditional aesthetic properties may nevertheless have different aesthetic properties in ways that I have suggested to be possible. It is also not clear from what Davies says whether artworks that are theory-dependent and historically responsive have value in virtue of these properties, or that these properties make value unnecessary. If a work of Conceptual art, such as Victor Burgin’s *All Criteria*, has value (as I think it does), then the non-traditional value it has in relation to theory and art history, as well as its value that derives from engaging the subject-object relationship in a new way, is intellectual, not perceptual.

It is essential, according to Davies, to distinguish between defining art and theorizing about art. Defining art successfully is citing all those properties that every artwork has in virtue of which it is a work of art that nothing that is not art has, or can have and not be art (31). A theory of art, by contrast, is more general in concerning ‘what is typical or normative for works of art’, and may consider ‘how artworks are identified and individuated’ (32). The normative dimension recognized by theory is thought to be essential to definition for those philosophers who think that ‘value is essential to anything’s being art’ (32). The problem—stated by Davies and recognized by philosophers, such as George Dickie, who distinguish art in the classificatory sense from art in the evaluative sense—is bad art. If a thing is art only if it has (positive) value, then it becomes conceptually impossible to speak of bad works of art—such as late de Chirico paintings—which, as Dickie has noted, is clearly undesirable. While Davies sides with Dickie here, and what he calls the descriptivist position, he does recognize the importance to art of value. It is just that, although artists attempt to create works of lasting value, and audiences view art in an attempt to experience value, having value is not a necessary condition of a thing’s being art. Rather, ‘the definition of art must be

descriptive’, and ‘value is neither necessary nor sufficient for art as product, or as the body of its works’ (33).

Although art may be conceptually separate from value in the wider sphere of all art, since objects do not enter art history unless they have some kind of value of a repertory of values, value would seem to become a necessary condition of the definition of art-historical art. (I gather that the notions of art-historical art and what Davies sometimes calls ‘Art with a capital “A”’ (54, 135) are the same in separating entities that are intended to be both art and of significant interest and importance from entities that either are not so intended or are so intended and fail.) Although he does not consider it, this suggests that, while we might take a descriptive approach to the broader body of artworks that includes mediocre or bad artworks, a functionalist approach to art-historical artworks may be required to recognize that significant art has some value in virtue of which it has that significance.

In examining Arthur Danto’s end-of-art thesis, Davies points out that Danto in fact has two different views of art’s putative demise. In the first and—according to Davies more powerful—version, ‘art is transmuted into philosophy’ (126) by raising the question, ‘Why is this art when something just like it is not?’ (121). The later, ‘more plausible view’ is that the ‘end of art is marked by works with forms enabling them to pose the philosophical question about art’s nature’ (126). Davies points out a number of plausible objections to Danto’s thesis, perhaps the strongest of which notes that, although ‘art’s historical challenge and purpose is to reveal its own nature’ (120), in revealing that nature in certain 20th century artworks art is thereby liberated, and henceforth it ‘can both please and *be* itself’ (128, his italics). Davies continues: ‘That [however] should not be what he [Danto] means, because his main thesis is that art was most emphatically and graphically being itself in the course of working out its historical destiny.’ Davies says that Danto, in maintaining that art has reached a point in history where it can now be itself, intimates that art’s ‘historical duty was a burden’, and so art’s ‘historical phase [that led to its raising the question about itself that it is powerless to answer] does not express art’s nature after all’ (128, all quotes).

The essays here collected are works in analytic philosophy of art. They are insightful, scholarly, and well written. That this work is a fount of sophisticated ideas that, if not the final word on the matters to which they are devoted, are a basis for further discussion, is something I hope to have shown.

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