

## The Ontology of Art

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The central question for the **ontology** of art is this: What sort of entities are works of art? Are they physical objects, ideal kinds, imaginary entities, or something else? How are works of art of various kinds related to the mental states of artists or viewers, to physical objects, or to abstract visual, auditory or linguistic structures? Under what conditions do works come into existence, survive, or cease to exist? [Notice that this starts with exclusive focus on the **object** rather than the **activity** of art.]

It is important to notice that this question is quite distinct from the question of whether or how ‘art’ may be **defined**. The ontological question does not ask what conditions anything must satisfy if it is to be a work of art, but rather, of various entities accepted as paradigm works of art of different genres (e.g. *Guernica*, *Clair de Lune*, or *Emma*), it asks: What sort of entity is this? And what sorts of entity in general are paintings, musical works, novels, and so on? Even the best answer to this question is unlikely to provide anything like a ‘definition’ that will distinguish art from non-art, since the relevant ontological status(es) may be shared with a great many other things, and since works of art of different kinds may have different ontological statuses. [Argument for the distinction between **ontology** and **definition**.]

Although it seems that few people have a ready answer to the question of the ontological status of the work of art, some relevant considerations are built into our common sense understanding of works of art and practices in dealing with them. We normally think of works of art as things created at a certain time, in particular cultural and historical circumstances, through the imaginative and creative acts of an artist, composer, or author. Once created, we normally think of works of art as relatively stable and enduring public entities that may be seen, heard, or read by a number of different people who may enter legitimate arguments about at least some of the work’s features. While these features characterize our understanding of all sorts of works of art, our understanding and treatment of works of different sorts diverges regarding other features.

Works of painting and (non-cast) sculpture we ordinarily treat as individual entities, such that even if exact copies are made from them, the work itself is identical with the original. As individual entities, we treat such works as capable of being bought and sold directly and moved about to reside with their new owners. We also normally consider such works capable of being maintained and surviving certain changes in their physical constitution (i.e. restoring a painting, replacing a small part of a sculpture), but capable of being destroyed if the relevant canvas or piece of clay is destroyed or changed

in certain ways (i.e. if solvent is applied to the pigmented surface of the canvas, or the clay is dissolved and reshaped).

Works of (traditionally scored classical) music and literature, on the other hand, may have many performances and many copies; although we may privilege the author's signed manuscript, it is only of historical interest, and may be destroyed without the work itself going out of existence. Works of music and literature themselves (as opposed to copies of the work or score or recordings of a performance) are not bought and sold as literally as diamonds, pearls, and works of painting and sculpture; instead, performance rights, reproduction rights, or copyrights to the works may be sold, but no physical object need be shuffled from city to city for such transactions to occur. Nor does any single physical object need to be protected and maintained to prevent the work from destruction, for the work of music or literature may survive as long some copy of it remains, though it may be destroyed if all copies and memories of it are gone.

**These divergences suggest that works of art may not all be of the same ontological type—in particular concrete works of art such as painting and non-cast sculpture may differ in status from works of music and literature.** The relevant ontological divisions need not go strictly with the categories of visual art, music, drama, etc., for works of printmaking, cast sculpture, installations, and conceptual art may differ in ontological status from traditional painting and (non-cast) sculpture (and from each other); works of improvisational, folk, or popular music may differ in status from traditionally scored works of classical music; and works of performance art may differ from traditional drama. While all of these cases should ultimately be considered separately, for simplicity I will focus here on the cases of painting and (non-cast) sculpture on the one hand, and on the other hand on works of literature and music roughly of the 'classical' Western tradition. Remarks below should be understood as implicitly limited to those canonical forms. Any progress we can make towards answering the question in those cases may provide some guidance when investigating the ontology of other forms of art.

Although the common sense understanding of works of art may be fairly obvious, determining the ontological status of works of art is extremely difficult, as is immediately evident from the extraordinary variety of answers among the major contenders. Indeed works of art (of some or all kinds) have been placed in just about every major ontological category—including those of mental entities, imaginary objects or activities, physical objects, and abstract kinds of various sorts. I will begin in Section 1 by briefly surveying a range of major views. While this survey is certainly not exhaustive (and some other options will be discussed in Section 3), it should make evident the variety of major views that have been held. But despite the great range of views available, none seems fully satisfactory, for each of them conflicts in serious ways with the common sense understanding of art discussed above. This raises the questions addressed in Section 2, namely whether such conflicts with common sense pose genuine problems for theories of the ontology of art, and in general how we should adjudicate among competing ontologies of art. Answering these questions will help reveal why the problem of the ontology of the work of art has proven so intractable. Perhaps more importantly, as I

discuss in Section 3, it will also suggest where we should go to look for a more adequate theory, and demonstrate why the issue of the ontology of art has widespread implications for metaphysics and for philosophy generally.

### 1. A range of views

A first, obvious view of the ontology of art is that works of art are just physical objects—lumps of marble, pigment-covered canvasses, sequences of sound waves or marks on pages—so that their ontological status is no more (or less) puzzling than that of our familiar sticks, stones or pieces of marble. The simple physical-object hypothesis (as Wollheim (1980) calls it), however, has come under attack from a variety of directions, and its failings have inspired the development of a number of alternatives.

R. G. **Collingwood** famously denies that any work of art is a physical object, for two reasons. First, not only is imaginative creation necessary for creating a work of art (unlike a mere physical object), Collingwood argues that it may also be sufficient; a composer may create a work of music merely “in his head”, by imagining the relevant tune, without ever having to write a score or play a note. Thus, he concludes, the work of music (and analogously for the other arts) must be something “in the composer’s head”, not a series of heard notes or a physical sequence of sound waves (1958: 139). (This, however, seems at best a borderline case of artistic creation, and surely in the case of other arts such as painting, sculpture, or architecture, we in no way allow that an artist has created a work of art of the relevant sort if she has created something merely “in her head”). Secondly, he argues that a work of art of whatever form is not perceived by merely, say, hearing the noises of a musical performance or seeing the colors of a painting. Instead, seeing the work of art *as such* requires imagination e.g. to supplement or correct the heard sounds, subtract noises from the audience outside, and so on. Indeed, he urges, really experiencing a work of art requires a “total imaginative experience”, involving e.g. tactile as much as visual imagination in experiencing a work of painting (1958: 144-7). **Thus, he concludes, works of art themselves are never painted canvasses, series’ of noises, or any other external objects. These are merely means that an artist may provide to help observers reconstruct for themselves something like the total imaginary experience the artist had in creating the work. This “imaginary experience of total activity” of the artist’s, recreated by competent viewers, is the true work of art** (1958: 149-151).<sup>1</sup> [The work of art is an imaginary (nonphysical) **activity** (mental).]

Jean Paul **Sartre** similarly argues that works of art are never ‘real’ objects that can be simply perceived as painted canvasses are, but rather are imaginary entities, since seeing the aesthetic object requires *imaginative* acts of consciousness (1966: 246-7).

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Ridley (1997) has recently argued against the traditional interpretation of Collingwood as holding works of art to be imaginary things, suggesting that when Collingwood speaks of works of art as “in someone’s head” he is merely calling attention to the fact that understanding a work of art is not a mere matter of experiencing auditory or visual sense data. While the latter claim seems apt, it doesn’t decide the ontological issue. Collingwood certainly seems to suffer from the common ontological problem of noticing that something (here, a work of art) cannot be identified with a mere external physical object, and finding nowhere else to put it, concluding that it must be in the mind.

Unlike Collingwood, however, Sartre does not think of works of art as imagined *activities*, but rather as imaginary or “unreal” *objects*, created and sustained by acts of imaginative consciousness, and existing only as long as they remain the objects of such acts. [The work of art is an imaginary (nonphysical) **object**.]

The apparently great contrast between perception of “real” objects and observation of works of art, however, seems to rely on an inadequate phenomenology of ordinary experience. It may require ‘imagination’—that is (as Collingwood treats it) supplementing some aspects of experience and ignoring others, grasping more than what is carried by “raw” sense perception (if there is such a thing), for a doctor to apprehend her patient’s disease (just viewing red spots is not enough), or for a scientist to consider the nature of a far away star or subatomic particle, or indeed for ordinary people to experience the houses and traffic lights, drivers’ licenses and lecture halls around them rather than mere isolated visual and auditory phenomena. But while this may have various interesting implications, surely that fact alone does not demonstrate that the objects conceived in each case are merely imaginary objects “in the heads” of individual observers and existing only as long as they are thought of.

[Problems] In any case, viewing works of art as imaginary activities or objects rather than as physical objects seems to invite more problems than it solves. Collingwood’s view (1958: 142), as he admits, entails that works of music cannot be heard, nor paintings seen, since imaginative activities cannot be perceived; and both views make it extremely difficult to see how *one and the same* work of art could be experienced and discussed by many different people, since each would seem to be engaged in her own imaginative activities and experiencing her own imaginary objects. On such imaginative views no work of art can be destroyed through destroying such entities as painted canvasses, since the works themselves exist only in the minds of artist and audience. Similarly, contrary to the regular practices and assumptions of the art world, true works of art cannot be bought or sold, performed or read aloud, restored or mechanically reproduced. Finally, viewing works of art as imaginary objects or activities has the consequence that works of art exist intermittently, depending on the presence or absence of the relevant sorts of supporting mental state (Wolterstorff 1980: 43). For as in the case of all imaginary objects, works of art depend for their existence and total essence on our acts of imagination (Sartre 1966: 160). Given these extreme violations of our ordinary understanding of and ways of dealing with art, the imaginary-entity hypothesis hardly seems likely to provide a superior alternative to the physical-object hypothesis.

**There are, however, other, better arguments against identifying works of art of any kind with physical objects.** We must first ask how to construe the thesis that works of art are physical objects: Is it the strong view that they are identifiable with the *mere* lumps of matter that make them up, describable *purely* in terms of physics? So stated, the view is hardly plausible—certainly it is essential to works of art as we normally understand them that they have certain intentional, meaning-oriented, and/or aesthetic properties. Yet the prospects for describing any of these properties purely in the terminology of physics seem dim at best. Moreover, many arguments have been raised both within aesthetics and in the literature on material constitution (Johnston 1997: 44-62, Baker 2000: 27-58), against

identifying statues, paintings, and other artifacts with their constituting matter since the two may have different identity or persistence conditions (i.e. the statue can survive the replacement of one of its fingers with a different piece of clay, while the lump of clay cannot survive such changes; and the clay can survive the reorganization of its parts into a ball, while the statue cannot); or different essential properties (the statue is essentially an artifact, created or at least selected by an artist, the lump of clay is not).

So it seems that if the physical-object hypothesis is to be made plausible, it must be construed as the weaker view that, though they might not be strictly identifiable with mere constituting matter or entities fully describable in the terms of physics, works of art are individual concreta (bearing physical properties perhaps among others) constituted by physical objects, but not identifiable with their constituting matter. While this view is clearly more plausible, the problem of determining the precise ontological status of works of art remains unresolved. For what sort of thing, exactly, is the work of art if (despite being a concrete individual, and thus not an abstract or imaginary entity) it is also not a *mere* physical entity? I will return to this issue in Section 3.

Whatever the fate of the view that works of painting and non-cast sculpture are physical objects, there are extremely good reasons to deny that *all* works of art are physical objects in either the strong or weak sense. Thus, e.g., while Wollheim and Wolterstorff both allow that *some* sorts of art (paintings, non-cast sculptures) are physical objects, both deny that this holds for *all* sorts of art. For in works of music, literature, or drama there is no particular physical object, process or event that can plausibly be identified either with the work of art itself or its constituting basis. In music, for example, as is often observed (Ingarden 1989: 7-16, 23-26; Wollheim 1980: 5-8), the work itself cannot be identified with any copy of the score nor with any performance, since (among many other reasons) copies of the score cannot be heard, and it can survive the destruction of any copy of the score and outlast the duration of any performance. Nor can the work of music (or literature, drama or dance) be identified with the totality of all such performances (or copies), since that would entail (e.g.) that the work is not complete until long after the composer's death, when the last performance is finished, and that the work itself would have been different had last night's performance been cancelled.

**Given the failure of attempts to identify works of art with imaginary entities, and to identify at least many sorts of work with physical objects, the remaining option that naturally arises is to consider some or all works of art as abstract entities.** Thus, e.g., Richard Wollheim holds that **works of literature and music** are not physical objects or classes of these; they are **types** (distinct from classes or universals), of which copies/performances are **tokens**. Nicholas Wolterstorff takes works of music, literature, drama, and even certain of the visual arts (printmaking, cast sculptures, repeatable works of architecture) to be "norm-kinds", that is, kinds determined by the properties normative within them, where the properties normative within them are precisely those selected, e.g. by the composer as required for the correctness of a performance.

**Gregory Currie defends the more surprising view that *all* works of art are abstract types, "capable, in principle, of having multiple instances"** (1989: 8). Thus on his view, contrary to popular belief, paintings are just like novels and works of music

in having multiple instances of equal ontological and aesthetic standing. Thus although one instance of *Guernica* happens to be Picasso's original (and people may, irrationally, care about it more or mistakenly think of *it* as the work), there is no more reason to consider it identical with *the work of painting* than there is to consider Jane Austen's original manuscript identical with the literary work *Emma*. Moreover, Currie's view differs from Wollheim's and Wolterstorff's view also in viewing works of music and literature as types of *action*, namely the type of action of discovering a certain structure (of sounds, colors, etc.) via a particular heuristic path (the way the artist used to discover the structure) (1989: 7). The action-type hypothesis (as Currie calls it), like Collingwood's proposal, has the counter-intuitive consequence that works of art can never be perceived at all by observers, but can at best be reconstructed (Levinson 1992: 216-17).

Any view that identifies works of art (of any kind) with pure abstract structures immediately encounters other conflicts with the common sense conception of art. For types and kinds, traditionally understood, exist eternally, independently from all human activities; thus, contra traditional beliefs and practices regarding the arts, works of art on such models cannot genuinely be created by artists at all, but only selected from the range of available types or kinds.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, despite our ordinary beliefs that many ancient works of music and literature have been destroyed, on such views the works of art can in fact never be destroyed (though tokens or instances of them may be). Moreover, pure abstract types or kinds are generally held to be individuated exclusively by their distinguishing properties—but if that is so, then, contrary to our standard means of identification, such features as authorship or historical context are entirely irrelevant to the identity of a work, while even slight alterations in the properties of the type or normative within the kind result in a different work of art.<sup>3</sup>

It seems, then, that despite the diversity of views available, none is completely satisfying. **No work of painting, sculpture, music or literature can be identified with an imaginary entity, a mere physical object, or an abstract type or kind without requiring us to abandon or seriously revise the ordinary understanding of art embodied in basic beliefs and behaviors in our practices in dealing with the arts.** That is why the ontology of art turns out to present such a difficult philosophical problem. [Presupposition — theory derives from practice.]

## 2. Criteria of assessment

It might be thought, however, that we were premature in concluding that none of the above ontologies of art is adequate. Even if each of them conflicts with aspects of our common sense beliefs and practices regarding the arts, one might say, surely that does not show that they are wrong; perhaps it is common sense that is wrong and in need of revision on these issues, and one of the theories surveyed above may after all provide the

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<sup>2</sup> Wolterstorff and Currie accept that this consequence follows from their theories. Wollheim seem to have a less traditional concept of 'type' in mind, for he treats types as existing only where particulars can be correlated 'with a piece of human invention' (1980: 78). I return to this sort of option in Section 3 below.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of this point, see my (1999: 56-69).

correct account of the ontology of the work of art. Currie, for example, claims that even if the way we treat paintings “reveals a community-wide acceptance of the view that painting is singular”, “It by no means follows from this that painting is singular; it is possible that we are mistaken about this” (1989: 87). To assess whether or not this is a suitable reply, we must address the larger methodological issue: **What are the success criteria for developing and comparatively evaluating proposed ontologies of art? More particularly, are violations of common sense beliefs about art a problem for these views, or only for common sense itself?**

Some might say that the problems are only problems for common sense, for after all, common sense beliefs have often in the past conflicted with scientific theories, and when they do, we readily accept that common sense must give way to scientific theory. So similarly, they might suggest, our best aesthetic theories may simply require us to give up certain common sense beliefs about works of art. As has been pointed out elsewhere (McMahan 2000: 97-98), however, the reason scientific theories sometimes warrant dismissing common sense views is that scientific theories may be empirically extremely well-confirmed, giving us strong reason to believe their direct consequences, even if they conflict with prior widely held or ‘common-sense’ beliefs. But the same epistemic status may not be shared by philosophical theories. Not only is there no such empirical evidence available to confirm theories that hold works of art to be physical objects, action-types, or imaginary objects, it is far from clear what sorts of empirical findings could possibly count for or against any of the major views about the ontological status of works of art. Thus even if well-confirmed scientific theories occasionally conflict with common sense, giving us reason to abandon the latter, the analogy with the scientific case gives us no reason to think that common sense views should be tossed aside when they conflict with theories of philosophical aesthetics.

**Causal theories of reference** (Kripke 1972; Putnam 1975) provide the basis for another standard argument that common sense views are fallible. For these influential theories have insisted that the reference of names and natural kind terms is determined not by concepts or descriptions speakers of the language associate with the term, but rather by causal contact between those establishing (‘grounding’) the reference of a name, and the individual or kind referred to. Thus, on such theories, the reference of a name such as “Shakespeare” is not established by a relation between some description speakers associate with the name (such as: The author of *Hamlet*) and an individual who meets the description. Instead, it is established by a causal relation between the man referred to and the use of the name by those ‘grounding’ it by applying it to him directly. Others may acquire the name by ‘borrowing’ the reference from the original grounders, and thus reference back to that man may be secured and maintained, even if most commonly held beliefs about Shakespeare turn out to be false (i.e. if it turns out he did not write *Hamlet*). Similarly, according to such theories, a natural kind term such as “whale” acquires its reference not in virtue of certain animals meeting the descriptions speakers associate with the term “whale”, but by being applied directly to a certain sample of entities, after which point it refers to the kind to which all or most of those entities belong. Reference to the kind may be passed on to other speakers of the language (even if they have never seen a whale), and everyone can thereby

refer to whales even if common sense beliefs about the nature of whales are radically wrong (e.g. even if everyone believes they are fish).

Thus, impressed by such theories of reference and the possibilities they leave open for radical mistakes in common sense beliefs about both individuals and kinds, some might suggest that none of our common sense beliefs about paintings, symphonies, novels (or things of other kinds) are inviolable, since these, like common sense beliefs about whales, may turn out to be completely false. On such a view, the metaphysical nature of a symphony or novel is a matter for substantial discovery, about which all the beliefs and practices associated with common sense views of art could turn out to be wrong, and so the violations of common practices or beliefs that plagued the theories above should not be counted against them.

That argument, however, relies on the idea that what might be called “art-kind” terms, such as “symphony”, “novel”, or “painting”, like natural kind terms, refer causally. **Causal theories of reference**, however, were devised with **natural kind** terms in mind, and there has been substantial debate over whether the same theory of reference applies to **artifactual kind** terms or other general terms.<sup>4</sup> Indeed terms such as “symphony” and “novel” do not seem to be introduced by mere causal contact with independent denizens of reality, but rather to arise by **stipulating** their application to works of extant traditions meeting certain (perhaps vaguely specified) criteria. If one holds a **descriptive theory of reference** of art-kind terms, however, then the reference of terms like “symphony” is determined by the **beliefs** of speakers about the conditions relevant to something’s being a symphony, and **as a result radical revisions of such common sense beliefs cannot be correct, for any great shift from these will prevent whatever conclusions one reaches from being about symphonies.**

Fortunately we need not settle that debate here. For regardless of whether or not art-kind terms can be shown to function differently than natural kind terms, **there is independent reason to think that complete revisions of common sense beliefs about the ontological status of works of art do not make sense and cannot be justified by a causal theory of reference.** As has often been noted, pure causal theories of reference (for both singular and general terms) suffer from a ‘qua’ problem.<sup>5</sup> That is, in the case of naming, there are many things with which one is in causal contact: A person, her physical body, her nose, her hair color, a part of her life span, etc. A pure causal theory of the reference of names must leave it radically indeterminate which of these a particular name refers to, since the would-be grounders of a name’s reference have causal contact (in part or whole) with all of these sorts of things. Similarly, in the case of general terms, the qua problem arises since any sample one attempts to ostend will have members that belong to a great variety of kinds; a single sample may contain members of the natural kinds homo sapien, mammal, animal, as well as of the social kinds American, Republican, and self-employed individual, and many more besides. To overcome the qua problem, Devitt and Sterelny (1999: 80) (among others) have argued that pure causal theories of reference must be modified to allow that, in

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<sup>4</sup> See Putnam (1975), Schwartz (1978, 1980), Kornblith (1980), and my (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> For a clear discussion, see Devitt and Sterelny (1999): 79-81, 90-93.

establishing the reference of a name, **“the grounder must, at some level, ‘think of’ the cause of his experience under some general categorial term like ‘animal’ or ‘material object’”**. Those grounding the reference of general terms, too, must have some concept of what *sort of kind* one is attempting to name—whether it is a basic natural kind (and if so, whether a species, genus, etc.), an artifactual kind, functional kind, property or pattern kind instantiated therein, etc.—in order to relieve the radical indeterminacy (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 91).

Such general **categorial concepts**, however, are precisely those that specify the relevant **ontological category** of the entity to be referred to, i.e. whether it is a person, a mere material object, a part of the whole, a property, etc. Similarly, the relevant beliefs about the sort of kind to be picked out by a general term must include beliefs about the level and sort of kind involved—whether a basic natural kind, an abstract property kind identified therein, an artifactual or social kind, etc. **As a result, the ontological category to which the referent belongs cannot be determined after the fact, by empirical investigations that may reveal the grounders’ original ontological assumptions to have been false. Instead, it is determined by the ontological category associated with the name by those who establish the reference of the term; if the term refers at all, it must refer to something of that ontological kind.**

The qua problem arises with a vengeance in attempting to refer to works of art, for in addition to the usual ambiguities among part, property, and whole, in the case of works of art there are also ambiguities of level. Causal contact, at the most basic level, is with a piece of canvas or lump of marble (or perhaps with the relevant masses of subatomic particles) in the case of paintings and sculptures. To establish the work of art as the referent of a name such as “Guernica” or “David”, it seems, would-be grounders of the name of this or any work of art must have an idea of what sort of thing they are trying to name (a work of painting or sculpture), and what sort of thing that is: how it relates to those physical objects, in what way its identity, individuation and survival conditions differ from those of the physical bases, and so on (i.e. that *Guernica* would be destroyed by dissolving the pigmented surface of the canvas, though the canvas would not be). Similarly, those attempting to ground the reference of a name of a work of music or literature are most directly causally connected with sound waves or pieces of paper, and can only succeed in naming the work of music or literature instead if they have at least a tacit **concept** of the ontological status of works of art of the relevant sort, and how they are related to physical performances and copies.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, would-be grounders of the reference of general terms such as “painting”, “musical work” or “novel” must associate the term with certain criteria enabling them to pick out the relevant kind of work of art rather than a kind of fabric, sound wave, paper, etc. This, again requires at least a nascent **concept** of the ontology of works of

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, it might seem that since such groundings must be affixed to some or other spatio-temporal entity with which one can be in causal contact—not with any sort of abstract entity—that this would rule out any views that would count any sort of work of art as being an abstract entity of any kind. I have argued elsewhere, however (1999: 43-54), that reference to *dependent* abstracta of various sorts can be made via their spatio-temporal foundations. To accept this suggestion and enable direct reference to dependent entities of various kinds, however, causal theories must be modified with an ontologically descriptive element, as described above.

art of that kind, and of what distinguishes them from the physical entities in the immediate vicinity. **Since those ontological conceptions determine what (ontological) sort of entity is picked out by the term (if anything is), they are not themselves open to revision through further “discoveries”.**

Thus one cannot appeal to causal theories of reference to motivate the view that the common sense conceptions of artists, composers, critics, and audience regarding the ontological kinds of symphonies, paintings, or novels may all be radically mistaken, and that a theory in radical violation of those assumptions may be true. Regardless of whether a descriptive or moderated causal theory of reference is preferable for names of works of art and art kind terms, beliefs—at least of those in the art world establishing the reference of such singular and general terms—*determine* the ontological status of the referents of the terms.

Of course this does not mean that artists, critics, or others responsible for establishing the reference of names of works of art and of general terms such as ‘painting’, ‘symphony’ or ‘novel’ must have a fully developed theory of the ontological status of works of art in formal philosophical terms. Instead, it is enough that they have basic views about the relation between works of art and the relevant physical objects, copies and performances such as those described in the common sense view at the outset of this paper. It does seem reasonable to suppose that, in order to successfully name a symphony or ground the reference of the general term ‘symphony’, for example, someone must have a concept of what sort of thing a symphony is—e.g. that it is distinct from its score or any copy of it, that it is the sort of thing that may be performed many times, more or less perfectly, and so on. It seems entirely plausible, even requisite, that artists and others in the art world have (at some level) these kinds of beliefs; such beliefs also form the backbone of practices of selling, displaying, performing, and restoring works of art of various kinds.

Coherence with just these background practices and (tacit or explicit) beliefs is typically used in assessing various positions about the ontology of works of art, as it was in the various critical remarks of Section 1. If the above discussion is correct, this is entirely appropriate, for—provided one accepts that at least some names of works of art and terms for kinds of works of art refer—it is such beliefs and practices that determine the ontological status of the works and kinds of works referred to.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it seems, if one accepts that there are works of art at all, the *only* appropriate method for determining their ontological status is to attempt to unearth and make explicit the assumptions about ontological status built into the relevant practices and beliefs of those dealing with works of art, to systematize these, and put them into philosophical terms so that we may assess their place in an overall ontological scheme. As a result, consistency with such beliefs and practices is the main criterion of success for a theory of the ontology of works of art. While it must be allowed that these practices may be vague or leave certain issues indeterminate, so that any *precise* philosophical theory must supplement them in certain ways as well as interpreting their

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<sup>7</sup> Since the concepts of would-be grounders only establish the ontological kind of the entity referred to, *if anything is in fact referred to* (i.e. if the grounding succeeds), this alone does not rule out taking the eliminativist view that there are no works of art corresponding to our common-sense concepts. I discuss why this sort of move is nonetheless misguided in my (2001).

dictates, clearly any view that violates them too drastically is not talking about our familiar works of art and kinds of works of art at all. Thus radically revisionary views like Currie's can at best be seen as suggestions about how our practices ought to be revised (in a way that he would perhaps find more coherent and justified), not as descriptions of what sorts of things our familiar works of art 'really are'.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The Road to a Solution

We are now in a position to explain why an adequate ontology of art has proven so elusive: **There has been a conflict between the demands of the problem and the materials available for a solution.** For the central criterion of success for theories about the ontology of art is their coherence with the ordinary beliefs and practices that determine the kinds of entities works of art are. But although different philosophers have tried placing works of art in just about all of the categories laid out by standard metaphysical systems—categories like those of imaginary objects, purely physical objects, or abstract kinds of various sorts—none of those fits completely with common sense beliefs and practices regarding works of art. This explains both the diversity of solutions (as theorists turned from one category to another in search of an adequate solution) and the failure to find a completely satisfactory solution despite these diverse efforts.

In the conflict between the need to provide an ontology of works of art that is adequate to ordinary beliefs and practices regarding the arts, and the need to choose from the ready-made categories of familiar ontologies, the former demand must win out if we are to offer a theory of our familiar forms of art at all. **So to resolve the problems of the ontology of art, we cannot simply select and appropriate available ontological categories to serve the relevant needs in aesthetics; instead we must return to fundamental metaphysics, to rethink some of the most standard bifurcations in metaphysics and develop broader and finer-grained systems of ontological categories.** While the details of positive views for all of the different art forms cannot be worked out and argued for here, in closing I will suggest the direction that it seems any acceptable view should take, and why it will require broadening traditional systems of ontological categories.

It has long been common practice to divide purported entities into mind-independent physical objects on the one hand, and merely imaginary objects, projected properties, or entities that exist "only in the mind" on the other hand. But even if one accepts that there are things of both kinds, such standard divisions leave no room for entities such as paintings and sculptures. For, as we have seen, these cannot be simply identified with mind-independent physical stuff on pain of getting the wrong existence, identity and survival conditions, nor can they be treated as merely imaginary objects or activities without denying their status as perceptible public objects. Instead, if we take seriously our ordinary beliefs and practices regarding paintings (as I have argued we must), it seems we should allow that they fall between these standard categories, as entities materially constituted by physical objects but

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<sup>8</sup> This echoes Jerrold Levinson's point against Eddy Zemach's view (1986: 245) that paintings are not individual objects, but rather can consist of different canvasses at the same time. As Levinson writes, "a revolutionary proposal as to how we might *reconceive* paintings...is being advanced under cover of a clarificatory thesis as to what paintings *are*" (1987: 280-281).

also dependent on forms of human **intentionality**.<sup>9</sup> Thus unlike imaginary objects or activities, such works of art are mind-external, public entities, continuously existing once created, even if they are not constantly being observed or thought of. Unlike imaginary objects or abstracta, they are perceptible, and are materially constituted by certain physical objects, and may be destroyed if their constituting base is. **But unlike purely mind-independent physical objects, it is metaphysically necessary that they can come into existence only through intentional human activities; while it is logically possible that a pigmented canvas exist without those, it is not possible that such a thing be a *work of art*.** [Here is where “second nature” comes in.] Furthermore, unlike mere physical objects, they typically have essential [mind-internal] visual, meaningful, and aesthetic properties, involving e.g. color and visual form, representation, symbols, allusion, that depend on human perceptual capabilities, culture, and practices.<sup>10</sup> In short, to accommodate paintings, sculptures, and the like, we must give up the simple bifurcation between mind-independent and mind-internal entities, and acknowledge the existence of entities that depend in different ways on both the physical world and human intentionality.

Another standard division of ontological categories that has held sway at least since Plato is the divide between spatio-temporally located, changing, perishable concrete objects, and non-spatio-temporally located, independent, changeless, eternal abstracta. But neither of these categories comes close to capturing central features of our beliefs and practices about works of literature and music. Such entities seem to be abstract in the sense of lacking a particular spatio-temporal location and being capable of continued existence independent of that of any *particular* copy or performance of them (or any other particular physical object). Yet at the same time, they seem not to be eternal kinds or platonistic structures of any sort, for it is again central to our beliefs and practices about these things that they are cultural artifacts of a certain sort, which came into existence at a certain time in a particular cultural and historical context, at the hands of a particular author or composer, and which might be destroyed again if all copies, performances, and memories regarding them cease to be. **Thus, although such things are not spatio-temporally located, they do have certain temporal properties, such as a temporal origin.** This is a point emphasized by Ingarden (1989: 10-11), who urges that musical works thus cannot be categorized with either real (spatio-temporal) or ideal objects. Similarly Levinson (1990) takes it as a fundamental requirement on any ontology of music that it preserve the idea that musical works are brought into existence by their creator’s activities. As a result, he argues, musical works cannot be pure sound structures, but must be structures of sound and performing means, *as indicated by a particular composer at a certain time*—where indicated structures, unlike pure structures, are created. Moreover, unlike the platonist’s abstracta, **works of music and literature do not exist independently; they can only come into existence through forms of human intentionality, and even once created, they are not independent and eternal, but depend for their ongoing existence on that of some copy or performance, or the**

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Margolis’ view that works of art are physically embodied culturally emergent entities provides one example of a view that does treat them as in between such category bifurcations (1999: 67-100).

<sup>10</sup> Roman Ingarden provides similar arguments against identifying the architectural work of art with the real building in (1989, 262-3).

**means for creating one (whether via a score, recording, memory, or some combination of these).**

Thus taking seriously the view that there are works of music and literature, and that their ontological status is determined by central beliefs and practices regarding them, requires us to admit that there may be categories of entities between those of concrete individuals and platonistic abstracta: a category for what I have elsewhere (1999) called “**abstract artifacts**”. Moreover, like works of painting and sculpture, works of music and literature seem to depend for their existence on certain human intentional states without being identifiable either with the imaginary creations of individual minds or with physical objects. Thus on both counts, works of literature and music seem to fall between the cracks of traditional category systems; accommodating them will require acknowledging intervening categories for temporally-determined, dependent abstracta: abstract artifacts created by human intentional activities.<sup>11</sup>

A careful consideration of the ontology of art has impact and applications far beyond aesthetics, for it demonstrates that standard category bifurcations are non-exhaustive, and that we need to accept a finer-grained range of ontological categories if we are to include such entities as works of art in our ontology. Developing a more adequate ontology of works of art may also lay the groundwork for a more adequate ontological treatment of social and cultural objects generally, which are so often neglected in naturalistic metaphysics. For, like paintings and sculptures, other artifacts and concrete social objects such as tables, drivers’ licenses, and pieces of real estate are not merely identical with the matter that constitutes them, since they (unlike the matter) have essential relations to human intentional states. Like works of music and literature, theories, corporations and laws of state seem to be abstract cultural entities that are created at a certain time through human activities. Broadening out familiar systems of categories in the ways required to do justice to works of art may thus also pave the way for resolving ontological problems for a variety of social and cultural objects. In short if, rather than trying to make works of art fit into the off-the-rack categories of familiar metaphysical systems, one attempts to determine the categories that would really be suitable for works of art as we know them through our ordinary beliefs and practices, the payoff may lie not just in a better ontology of art, but in a better metaphysics.

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Ingarden (1989: 4-5, 1973: 9-19), and my (1999: 131-2, 141-143).

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