

DO ARTWORKS HAVE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS?

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Art and aesthetics deal with deviant expressions. When we enter into the world of literary language specially, we face not only certain problems of ontology, but of linguistics and epistemology too. The problems that are here and dealt here with are of the extent to which language mirrors thought and thought reality. Human beings have the capacity to think of non-existent objects, impossible state of affairs and many kinds of peculiar deviant things. When we give utterance to these unusual thoughts, or write about these thoughts we produce certain things that have a peculiar deviant character. The deviant expressions are common in poetry and also they can be represented through any artwork. However, peculiar expressions carry peculiar thoughts with novelty, and novel thoughts are, therefore, expressed via the artworks, and the novelty consists in the fact that they conceive of the world in an unprecedented way. Such thoughts therefore, can be said to represent new conceptions, new ideas, and can be understood by us. Many thinkers claim that an artwork presents itself as an object of knowledge of its own kind which may have a special ontological status. Although an artwork may not be real or mental or ideal, yet it can be taken as a system of norms of ideal and outstanding concepts which are intersubjective. One can infer artwork to exist in collective ideology, changing with it, and fastened safely through individual mental experiences.

Ontology, as we all know, is the study of the kinds of things there are (exist) in the world. Now if one talks about the ontology of art, one may say that art takes the matter, form and mode, in which art exists. Artworks are, however, human creations, so not natural kinds, but may be taken as social constructs. The way we categorize them depends mainly on human interests, and so for this, ontology perhaps is difficult to be separated from sociology and ideology.

We may probably agree that there is a relationship between meaning and concept - now we need to consider a close relationship between concepts and facts in the world. The crucial question is, whether the "facts" as they appear in one's conception are limited to and may not surpass the facts as they obtain in the world. The fact is, there is no such limitation. A distinction may be considered between ontology tout court and one's personal ontology. The former means just what there is

in the outer natural world. This ontology provides the raw materials or data for individual ontologies. From these given materials, one may build all kinds of personal faculties; a human being may alter, modify and rearrange the materials of the natural world in infinite ways. In this process one is limited only as to the given materials; as to their rearrangement, one enjoys lavishly. By the raw materials we understand not only substances, but also attributes like, properties, relations, states etc. Thus, in the art-world, one can conceive of all sorts of objects and states of affairs that surpass what is given by the raw materials of the world, and the creator surpasses by the creator's own imagination. The imaginative abilities of the humans strive to transcend the limits of experience and dive into the sea of creation. In Kant we see that he loves the word "genius" rather than "creativity". For Kant, a genius is a rare phenomenon, and it is the faculty of presenting novel ideas of aesthetics. "Genius" is a natural gift or talent of human being. This natural talent is elegantly expressed through poetry as an artwork.¹

However certain significant questions are involved with the ontological status of artwork such as: 1) What sort of an object is a work of art? 2) Are they physical objects, ideal objects, and imaginary entities? 3) When can we say that an artwork is existing? 4) Under what conditions do they survive and cease to exist? 5) When is it damaged? 6) When is it destroyed? 7) How are different kinds of artworks related to the mental states of creators, to physical objects or to any other things? 8) Again, what kind of relationship is there between them and the creator, audiences, physical objects or other kinds of structures? 9) Is this artwork a kind of thing seen by people in the art gallery? 10) Again, which features are essential to artwork? and so on. This ontological status of artwork is said to be fundamentally fixed by its identity, existence, and persistence conditions - these fix what category of object it is. In fixing this, what properties of the artwork are essential or accidental, what kind of changes interfere with its preservation etc, are also may be fixed.

Philosophers have probably placed all artworks in every ontological category, considering some to be physical objects; others abstract structures, imaginary entities, action types or tokens and so on. However, if we at all try to answer the important question, "what is the ontological status of artwork?" - we would have to keep in

mind that the relevant ontological statuses may be shared with many other things, and artworks of different kinds may have different statuses.

What is a work of art? Some artwork may be understood as a kind of abstract entity having no spatio-temporal location. Again, for many, artworks should be recognized as something which come into existence and can be destroyed. Some says, that some artworks are a kind of abstract artifact taken as genuine creations. Some again says that works of art are non-physical like numbers and non-psychological, but which are of someone to a time and historical content. Some take artworks as created universals and embodied through the intentional activities of the creator.

Common sense understanding takes artworks as things created at a certain time, in particular cultural and historical circumstances, through the imaginative and creative acts of a creator. Once created, we normally think of artworks as public and somewhat stable kind of entities which may be, read, seen or heard by us. Even if exact copies are made from the works of painting and sculpture the work itself is identical with the original. As individual entities these works are capable of being bought and sold, moved to reside with their new owners. Also such works can be maintained and go through certain changes in their physical constitution and can be destroyed as well. Music and literature as artworks may have many performances and copies and may be destroyed without the work itself going out of existence. Works like these themselves are not bought and sold - rather, reproduction rights or copyrights to the works may be sold. Further, music or literature may survive as long some copy of it remains - though it may be destroyed if all copies and memories of it get lost.

The divergences show that artworks cannot be of the same ontological type - concrete artworks like painting and non-cast sculpture differ in status from music and literature. The ontological divisions need not go strictly with the categories of music, drama, visual art etc. However, to common sense understanding it is extremely difficult to determine the ontological status of artwork. Let us now try to briefly survey certain major views regarding ontology of art. Roman Ingarden's work on Art is mainly a work on ontology. His ontology of the literary work was taken to argue against transcendental idealism. To him, literary works and the characters and objects represented in them are just the examples of purely intentional objects - objects owing

their existence and essence to consciousness. Ingarden tried to determine the ontological status of artwork, its relation to concrete entities like copies of score, painted canvasses, sound events, also to creative acts of artists and the conscious states of observers.² He says, that the literary work's "complexity and many-sidedness" contribute to its aesthetic power and "enriches our lives".³ He keeps out the written and printed text from literary work. He says that the printed cannot belong to the elements of literary work of art itself, rather it forms its physical foundation and plays a modifying role in reading.⁴

Echoing Ingarden, Gadamer says that an artwork manifests itself uniquely and it is adequate to call it a "creation" (Gebilde) or a self-sufficient creation. It is always pointing beyond itself to what it is not, and in this sense artwork is transcendent object. For Ingarden, Gebilde refers to a work that exists on different levels, and its completion depends upon many levels and brought into play first by the creator and then by the reader or observer. An artwork never fully comes into being until the observer or reader constructs it, and this job is called by Ingarden "concretization".⁵The act of construction brings object and subject into being as players in the re-creation of artistic play. No doubt that the subject engaged in aesthetic experience and the object confronted retain some kind of independent ontological status. Yet both take on a new identity - each is now to be identified with the game in which they are in, as one.

The ontological status of the artwork goes further when artwork is taken as self-sufficient creation, that is, when artwork comes into being as a product, and stays on its own, independently of its creator's intention. When I read a novel, whatever the author intended to convey is of no immediate concern to me - what is of concern to me are the characters, events that become alive for me, it is then I who love them and I do so in accordance with my beliefs and convictions. Ingarden says that since the world of artwork comes into being through my participation in its construction, it derives many of its characteristics and features from me. But no doubt the artwork also imparts something to me. In describing art as essentially imitative is to claim that it imitates human nature by reflecting it. When we return from the world of the artwork, we, therefore, bring bit of that world with us - this reflects the intersubjectivity and opens up novel ways of looking at things as well. Thus, in this

way Gebilde may play a significant and crucial role in our emotional, intellectual and cultural development.

Some philosophers talk about a plurality of modes of being, and some have attributed modes of being other than existence to works of art. Joad would say that the artwork is a subsistent object, neither mental nor material, which, like other universals, is a part of the universe possessing a special kind of being in its own right. Another view of the ontology of art is that artworks are just physical objects. However, this physical-object hypothesis of Wollheim has been challenged. Wollheim argues that there is an “incompatibility of property” between works of art and physical objects.⁶ For Wollheim, artworks are type and their embodiments tokens.⁷ But the question is, can a type be hung on a wall, transported, destroyed? Again work of architecture is not token of types but physical objects and to make them into types by infinitely reproducing them would be to destroy their aestheticity.

Further, suppose that John sees David Copperfield on his table. Is David Copperfield, therefore, identical with this book that John can see and touch? Obviously not, for, another copy lies on Ruth's table, and a single artwork cannot be identical with two separate physical things. The result is that the novel David Copperfield is identical with no physical thing. It is not a physical object, any more than is a piece of music, which is distinct from all its performances.

According to Margolis, artwork is not numerically identical to the physical object. He says that a visual artwork can be lively but not a physical object. He talks of three distinct things - physical object, the artwork which it “embodies”, and the type (an abstract particular) of which the artwork is a token. A sculpture is a cultural object and gains its aesthetic properties via an artist - once the stone has been transformed, it now obtains those properties. An artwork is more than a physical object - it is a physical object plus something else - something is actually added to the physical object, which is new shapes and qualities. Margolis would say that if there is an absence of specific proper attention, the artwork ceases to exist, even though the physical system stays perfectly. Again the same artwork gets its existence back when the same proper imaginative attention is turned upon the physical system that constitutes the supervenient base of the artwork, thereby reviving the correlative

aesthetic pattern. Artworks for Margolis are physically embodied culturally emergent entities⁸.

An important point concerning art-objects can be raised that all existing material things are art-objects, and all art-objects are nothing but material things. It stands, that there are no material things like tables, cars etc. which would go out of the orbit of art-objects, and on the other hand, that there are some artworks which would enjoy a special ontological status. The point is that an art-object may not be taken necessarily as a special kind of thing - rather it should be taken as a simple material thing as referred to by one of its aspects, i.e., qua beautiful. Since all things have qualities, they must have some sort of unity and complexity and so, anything has some aesthetic value. Even the ugliest thing can be aesthetically judged. Hence, it is clear that, everything has a valid interpretation as an art-object. Further, one may fail to observe any distinction between artworks, human made objects and natural objects. They can all be given the same status of art-objects. So there is no reason to distinguish between beauty and higher level aesthetic value as many thinkers do.

Many philosophers, however, raised question concerning the intermittence problem. We know that some works of art like Yeats's poem, Rabindranath Tagore's poem, Rembrandt's prints etc existed long, at least ever since their creation. But many works of art are not observed throughout the many centuries, or are not continuously seen - in this case can we still say that the works have their existence, or shall we have to say that they totally ceased to exist? It is said that if somebody, however, takes artworks as powers, or as having some kind of power, then, the intermittence problem could be kept aside. But then, viewing artworks as imaginary objects has the consequence that artworks exist intermittently, depending on the presence or absence of the supporting mental states.⁹ It is said that an artwork's continuous existence depends on the "passive disposition" of a physical object and the "dynamic disposition" of the appreciator as well.

Sartre however says, that imaginary objects, for their existence and essence depend on our acts of imagination. Let us have a little talk on the imaginative experience in art. Collingwood denies that any artwork is a physical object. He believes that imaginative creation is necessary and sufficient for creating an artwork. For example, the music is not a collection of noises, rather, the work of music and

indeed the other arts too, must be something “in the composer's head” and not a series of heard notes or a physical sequence of sound waves. Thus, music is an imaginary thing - it is the tune in the composer's head.¹⁰ Collingwood suggests that seeing the artwork as such requires imagination. He contends that the noises made by the singers, and heard by the audiences, are not the music at all - they are only means by which the audiences can reconstruct the imaginary tune that existed in the producer's head. Thus, artwork themselves are never painted canvasses, series of noises, or any other external objects - rather, these are only means that a creator may provide to help viewers or audiences for reconstructing something like the total imaginary experience the creator had in creating the work.¹¹ Hence, creator's this “imaginative experience of total activity”, recreated by competent audiences, is the real work of art according to Collingwood.

Sartre similarly argues that artworks are never real objects that can be simply perceived - but rather they are imaginary entities, for, the aesthetic object requires imaginative acts of consciousness.¹² Sartre also says, that the artworks are imaginary thing in the sense of systematically being the object of some kind of error about their mode of existence. For him, Beethoven's seventh symphony is outside of the real, outside of existence - we do not hear the symphony at all, rather hear the composition in our imagination. These statements open the door of the possibility of imagining artworks without believing in their existence. Unlike Collingwood, Sartre thinks of artwork as “unreal” objects, created and sustained by acts of imaginative consciousness, and existing only as long as they remain the objects of such acts. However, it is true that seeing artworks as imaginary activities or objects rather than as physical objects creates more problems.

As normally understood, artworks have certain intentional, meaning oriented, aesthetic properties. The artworks are different from their constituting matter - because the two may have different identity or persistence conditions. One may say that Physical-object hypothesis must be construed as the weaker view. Artworks are individual concreta constituted by physical objects, but not identifiable with their constituting matter. Again some would say that as concrete individual, artwork is not abstract or imaginary entity, nor even a mere physical entity.

However, according to Wollheim and Wolterstorff some arts like paintings, sculpture are physical objects, but in works of music, drama or literature there is no particular physical object process that can be identified either with the work of art itself or its constituting basis. Thus, not all sorts of art are physical objects. Some artworks present a physical object and some an abstract object. Thus for Wollheim, literature and music have a tinge of abstractness - they are types, of which copies/performances are tokens. Again, Wolterstorff takes artworks to be “norm-kinds.” He talks of ontology of multiple artworks. He makes use of the concept of “kind” - a music-work is a kind of performance. Kinds are not physical objects, but their instances are. Margolis's objection is that kinds are abstract entities and thus, unlike artworks, are neither created nor destroyed. Another view would say, what a creator creates is not a physical object, but a kind of physical object. Even the *Monalisa*, then should be thought of not as physical painting, but as a kind of painting, which has only one instance.

Currie, however, defends the view that all artworks are abstract types, “capable, in principle, of having multiple instances.”¹³ For him, paintings are just like novels and works of music in having multiple instances of equal ontological and aesthetic standing. He admits, artworks are action type - an artist discovers a structure, via a heuristic path, at a time. For Croce, however, artwork does not consist in a physical event or object, but rather in a mental intuition, which is grasped by the viewer or audience in the process of aesthetic understanding. But this kind of ideal theory of art faces difficulty, when we ask, what this intuition is, and how to identify this intuition with which any artwork is taken to be identical?

Beardsley, however, starts with the ontology of aesthetic objects which are a subset of perceptual objects. For Beardsley, neither aesthetic objects are presentations, nor are they classes of presentations, for, they must have some perceptual properties. Essentially presentations are sense-data of aesthetic objects. But that does not reduce aesthetic object to a presentation - it only analyses statements about them into statement about presentations.¹⁴ To Beardsley, aesthetic objects are also not artifact. Artwork is physical, we can perceive it, it is intersubjectively there in space and time, can have an outward appearance in a different way with different perspectives and at different times, may not be

understood once and for all, and it has certain properties. However, Beardsley afterwards shifted to a form of non-reductive materialism to see whether artworks can be treated as physical objects. This materialism perhaps, works well with singular artwork like paintings - but may create problems in “multiple artworks” like music compositions which have many performances. For that reason Beardsley, perhaps, is driven back to ontological pluralism. Davies’s view has a pragmatic constraint to the effect that artworks should ontologically be grasped in a way as to accord with those features of our critical and appreciative habits upheld on rational reflection.¹⁵ He talks of token events, rather than event-types.

According to Monistic thinkers all artworks fall within one ontological category, universals. If so, then, all artworks will come out false or uninformative. A realistic account holds that once artworks are brought into existence, they do not depend on anyone's beliefs or responses. It also holds that anything is discovered from something, if it exists already over there. Division between multiple and singular artistic items should not be taken as decisive for an ontology of art, for, it rests upon contingent thesis about what is technologically possible. Benjamin believes in the influence of technological change on our basic conception of artworks. He takes technological change as part of a liberating or progressive historical process. Some argued that technological possibility should not be taken as decisive for the monistic ontology of art - the significant point to be marked is, what is really metaphysically possible.

What about repeatable artworks? Poems, dramas, symphonies can be performed repeatedly. Repeatable artworks can be called abstract objects, lack spatio-temporal location, have multiple instances like copies, tokens, each of which again are concrete physical object possessing spatio-temporal location. The question is, if there are at all repeatable artworks, then to what ontological category they belong? Rohrbaugh would say that repeatable artworks have occurrences (Rohrbaugh, 2003, pp. 197-199), means, if there are such artworks; they are abstract objects, because no concrete object has instances. Foregoing briefly displayed diversity of views. Observation is: no work of music, literature, sculpture, painting etc. can be identified with an imaginary entity, a physical object, or an abstract type or kind without

abandoning or revising the ordinary understanding of art that is mingled with our beliefs, habits and practices.

Now, can we have criteria for evaluating ontologies of art? More clearly, what makes problem in aesthetic theories? Answer is, problems are problems of common sense - so aesthetic theories should give up certain common sense beliefs. Causal theories of reference provide argument, that common sense views are fallible. Again, modifications or alterations of common sense beliefs about the ontological status of artwork do not make sense and cannot be justified by a causal theory of reference. Moreover, pure causal theories of reference suffer from a 'qua' problem.¹⁶ However, coherence with background practices and beliefs is used in assessing various positions about the ontology of artworks. So, consistency with such beliefs and practices may be the significant criterion of success for a theory of the ontology of artworks. But categories like imaginary objects, physical objects, abstract kinds of various sorts do not fit completely with common sense beliefs and practices regarding artworks. A radical view about ontology of art is that despite popular belief, all artworks are action-types rather than individuals, or that literary works are eternal abstracts which can neither be created nor destroyed and so on. If this is correct, such view cannot be presented as discoveries about the real truth of the ontology of artworks that may overthrow common sense.

Can particular works of art be individuated? A work of art can be particular in the sense that it can be created and also can be destroyed, and thus, cannot be universal. Also it cannot be universal because it possesses physical and perceptual properties. But it is a peculiar kind of particular, because (1) it can instantiate another particular, and (2) it can be embodied in another particular. The first one has something to do with individuating artworks and anything, may, contingently depend on that. But the second one has to do with the ontologically dependent nature of actual artwork. An artwork is a peculiar kind of particular, unlike physical bodies. It can be said that type artworks are particulars. They are heuristically introduced for individuation. But every artwork is a token-of-a-type. However this does not mean that there are no types or that a creator cannot create a new kind of artwork. Actually, there are no types that are separable from tokens, because there are no tokens except token-of-a-type. The very process for individuating tokens entails individuating types.

Particular artworks cannot exist as embodied in physical objects. This is to say that artworks are culturally emergent entities - i.e., that artworks display certain properties or qualities that physical objects cannot display. These properties are intentional or functional and include symbolism, expressiveness, style, representation etc. Artworks appear and exist like physical objects, but they are something more than that. Hence, one may say that artworks are culturally emergent entities, they are revealed as novel entities, tokens-of-a-type which exists embodied in physical objects. A possible solution can be given by providing a method for determining the ontological status of artworks. The method is to make explicit the assumptions about ontological status built into the practices and beliefs of those dealings with artworks, and to assess their place in an overall ontological framework. It is tough to solve the problems of the ontology by the selection of the ontological concepts to serve the needs of aesthetics. Rather, the solution of the problem may lie in the return to a fundamental metaphysics and the development of wider systems of ontological categories.

Entities may, however, be divided into two categories - mind-independent physical objects and imaginary objects that are mind-dependent. If we take our beliefs and practices seriously regarding artworks like paintings, they would fall between those categories, as entities materially constituted by physical objects, but also dependent on forms of human intentionality. Such artworks are external to mind, whether observed or not, existing once created; unlike imaginary objects, they are perceptible, and may be destroyed. But unlike purely mind-independent physical objects it is metaphysically necessary that they can come into existence only through intentional human activities. Again, unlike mere physical objects, they uniquely have essential visual, meaningful and aesthetic properties or qualities which depend on human perceptual powers, culture and practices. We find, a difference between mind-external and mind-internal entities - but we must recognize the existence of entities that depend in different ways on both the physical world and human intentionality.

However, if we are to include artwork-like things in our ontology, we should accept a finer-grained range of ontological categories. If one tries to determine the categories that would be suitable for artworks as we know them through our ordinary beliefs and practices, the pay-off then perhaps, lie not just in a better ontology of art, rather in a better metaphysics. Further, according to Thomasson's view ontological

categories are determined by our social and linguistic practices. All kinds of artworks, are not available on their own - they cannot just be inserted into traditional ontologies, but they are part of a revisionary meta-ontology which can only be accepted or rejected as a whole. Thomasson talks of new ontological framework and his arguments for this show analogy between artworks and other socially created thing by social convention - e.g. scientific theories, marriages etc¹⁷. To him, human intentionality is essential for having suitable convention and for such objects to come into being. Gilson in his Mellon lectures in the National Gallery, Washington, 1955 (Published in 1957) claimed that an artwork has both aesthetic existence and artistic modes of existence with the substantial one. Artwork exists artistically qua product of the creator's activity or process. While, an artwork exists aesthetically when it is the object of somebody's aesthetic experience.

The existence of a finished artwork goes on to depend on the imaginative activity of the creator and also on the audience's or observer's appreciation. Some Philosophers have called this imaginative attitude as “conscious self-deception” – but they are really valuable and significant both for the creation and appreciation of art object. Although we just cannot dismiss art by calling it a fiction, we may somewhat describe it as a kind of lucid illusion in which we play with thoughts of certain situation which we know to be not existing. Artist's artwork however, can be compared to a child's imaginative play with a toy.

My observation is, that an artist or a creator can have an inner mental entity that is private and the creator expresses that private thing through art. It stands that art may merge with the private. However, phenomenologically internal objects called emotions with physical objects are there in the public outer world. Now if this be so, the concept of art can hardly exist ontologically and yet artworks exist empirically in this world. However, interesting issue concerning ontology is in the question of what makes an object a work of art? If an artwork is an object added with something else, the problem is to solve for that “something else” and no other, which lead us to search for the necessary condition for art-hood. It is quite rational to say that something is an artwork only if it has content with aim and meaning, an expression, an appearance and understanding of the content. This shows that in art what appears as external is totally the presentation of the inner. In the art-world we conceive of something which

veils its appearances in a very different and deviant way from the usual or what is ordinarily taken. But this changed outward form or appearance of the ordinary is essentially a contribution to the ontology of art in which “meaning” is significant.

Further, observation includes that there are some philosophers who go to such a height that the questions which are raised concerning ontology and identity of art are considered not even worth thinking about. They take these questions of art as marginal, as less important to the subject matter of aesthetics. In this context, I think, it is much better to give more emphasis not on the ontology of art, rather, on the serious practical questions on the value of art. Because to talk about the value of art according to my opinion, is evidently of the first importance, because it throws more significant light upon human life. One should note that in order for us from our metaphysical vantage point to conceive of the garden as sleeping, we have to transcend our world. So, the status of the expression is not a mere cognitive catachresis - it draws forth an act of construal, an act in which this situation described by the expression is conceived of as a possibility. The locus of such possibilities is an aesthetic world or metaphoric world.

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