A DEFENSE OF AESTHETIC ANTIESISSENTIALISM:
MORRIS WEITZ AND THE POSSIBLITY OF DEFINING ‘ART’

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Dedicated to Professor Arthur Zucker,
without whom this work would have been impossible.
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Introduction

A Brief History of the Role of Definitions in Art

In the September 1956 issue of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Morris Weitz published a highly influential article titled “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” in which he argued that the traditional aesthetician’s agenda of providing a definition of ‘art’ and of ‘artwork’ is a misconceived enterprise, and that the very nature of the concept ‘art’ precludes definitions.¹ Weitz’s article was immediately met by a number of objections. This thesis is a systematic defense of the kind of anti-essentialist aesthetic theory that Weitz set forth over fifty years ago and as such it will attempt to answer most of the many objections laid against his arguments.

This thesis then is confined to the role that definition plays in aesthetic theory. That is to say: is the question: “Is this object an artwork?” an answerable question? Definitions of art generally attempt to provide necessary and/or sufficient conditions to distinguish objects that qualify as artworks from objects that do not qualify as artworks. In order to decide whether the question “Is this object an artwork” is sensible, we must first ask “Is it possible to provide necessary and/or sufficient conditions that include everything that is an artwork and nothing that is not an artwork?”

For the sake of clarification let me point out that a “definition of art should be distinguished from a philosophical theory of art, which is invariably a broader project

¹ Paul Ziff’s article “The Task of Defining a Work of Art” in the January 1953 issue of *The Philosophical Review* argues for similar anti-essentialist conclusions and predates Weitz’s article by three years. Ziff’s article, however, has been less influential and so I am not directly concerned with its arguments in this essay.
with vaguer boundaries”.¹ That is, philosophical theories of art, while they may sometimes include a definition of art, treat a variety of aspects in aesthetics including value, the ontological status of artworks, historical complications of artworks, cognitive issues in art appreciation, the role of artistic intention, and many others, whereas a definition of art merely attempts to provide necessary and/or sufficient conditions to qualify artworks as such.

In the history of aesthetics many attempts at a definition of art have been made although all of them have eventually faced insurmountable philosophical complications. In the western tradition, the oldest definition of art comes from Plato and Aristotle. Ancient Greek aesthetics, and especially literary theory, is founded on a definition of art as mimesis, or imitation. Early in the Republic Plato uses the term variously to mean the process of signification between signifier and signified and as a technical term to denote something like fiction. Eventually though, after illustrating the dialectical process of realizing the higher realm of the forms, mimesis comes to signify all art as secondary to reality and tertiary to the realm of forms, insofar as art imitates reality which is itself an imitation of the more perfect realm of the forms. In the Poetics, on the other hand, Aristotle gives mimesis the more dignified role of representation, and through the process of mimesis artists and tragedians can represent reality, or rather, alternate realities through fiction.²

² Because of the disparate and much disputed nature of ancient Greek aesthetic theory in primary sources, much of this summary of mimesis comes from Glenn W. Most’s article “Mimesis” in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. For more information on Plato’s aesthetics see: Plato’s Republic, especially books II-IV and book X; and for more information on Aristotle’s aesthetics see: his Poetics.
But *mimesis*, while it does suggest a definition of art, is much more a theory of art according to distinction mentioned above. With this in mind, consider the birth of the fine arts in the Renaissance and the consequent distinction between diverse genres of art like painting, sculpture, poetry, architecture and music. When Renaissance thinkers divided the fine arts into the distinct genres that we are more or less still familiar with today, a definition or tentative definition of art as *mimesis* did not seem adequate. That is, while a theory of *mimesis* can easily point out the reasons why Fra Angelico’s *The Christ Crucified* qualifies as an artwork, it does little to help point out the reasons why the purely musical innovation of any given motet by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina should be considered art. With the division of the fine arts into various genres, philosophers started to question the adequacy of mimetic theories to classify certain types of less obviously representational art.

Despite these doubts, fundamentally mimetic definitions of art still persisted up until the nineteenth century. Kant’s theory of art, for example, seems to suggest a definition of art founded on the mimetic qualities of particular artworks coupled with the universal and normative aesthetic judgment of an art-appreciator: For Kant, fine art is one of two aesthetic arts, i.e. arts of representation where a feeling of pleasure is immediately in view. The end of *agreeable art* is pleasurable sensation. An appreciator of the fine arts gets this pleasurable sensation through the process of making aesthetic judgments, and Kant’s aesthetic judgments, according to Bender and Blocker:
do possess a kind of universality, but it is not the universality of a scientific law. Rather, it is the fact that we think our judgments of the beautiful should have force or efficacy for others; they are not, Kant claims, simply statements of our subjective preferences or private pleasures. And yet, they are not judgments which, like scientific predictions, can be deduced from conceptualizing the work of art as falling under some universal laws or principles of beauty.¹

Kant’s aesthetic theory, and consequently his definition of art, serves as a middle ground between the ancient theories of mimesis and the many cognitivist theories to come: on the one hand Kant, like the ancients, conceives of art as fundamentally representative, while on the other hand his theory of art appreciation is non-cognitivist insofar as it is not governed by universal principles of beauty. This non-cognitivist aspect of his aesthetic theory did not sit well with many later philosophers, and the attempt to build cognitive theories of art, establish universal principles of beauty, and consequently to give the necessary and sufficient conditions for artworks ushered aesthetics into the modern era.

Many philosophers attempted to give a definition of art in terms of their expression of emotion. That is, instead of defining artworks according to their mimetic or representative properties many philosophers thought it more accurate to define artworks according to the emotional content they either expressed to the appreciator or possessed in themselves. But these definitions faced various problems when, for example, philosophers pointed out that it is very often unclear what emotional content a given artwork is expressing, or if it is expressing any emotional content at all. Consider Frank Lloyd Wright’s *Falling Water*. What emotional

content, if any, does it express? What about any one of the Dale Chihuly’s Persian Glassworks? Philosophers who put forth definitions of art as expression are forced to come up with an *ad hoc* emotional content for artworks whose emotional content is evidently unclear, admit that much of what we consider art does not meet the conditions of their definition, or simply give up such definitions all together.

Some philosophers, seeing the difficulties that arise from defining art in terms of expression, moved to definitions which focused directly on artworks and their properties. Such formalist definitions focused on the actual properties unique to artworks: in painting, for example, the depiction of three-dimensional space in two-dimensional media; in music, the various scales and the effective use of their unique harmonic intervals; in poetry, prosody and diction. But these theories encountered problems too: whereas theories of expression seemed to neglect the formal properties of many artworks, formal theories seem to neglect the non-formal properties of many artworks. For example, suppose that I found while walking along the seashore a stone shaped exactly like the disk that the Greek *Disk Thrower* statue might have held. It has all the same formal qualities of the *Disk Thrower*’s disk, but I would not be inclined to call it art. *A fortiori*, defining an artwork solely in terms of its form would seem to require a further definition of artistic form. For example, we would probably be inclined to say that the continuous *crescendo* of Ravel’s *Bolero* is an integral part of its artistic form, but what about that individual E-flat of the clarinet, and what about the notes written on the score? In short, formalist definitions of art face the further
task of defining artistic form in order to distinguish those formal aspects of an artwork that do contribute to its qualification as such from those that do not.

Moving away from the limitations of both expressivist definitions and formalist definitions of art, philosophers sought a more inclusive definition based, much like Kant’s, on the aesthetic experience itself. Definitions of art based on aesthetic experience have dominated much of modern aesthetics and they are far too various and numerous for me to adequately treat here. Suffice to say that such definitions generally focus on the value of the experience that an appreciator has when viewing an artwork, and they are usually deeply connected with a much broader and vaguer task of providing a general theory of art.

Almost all of the aforementioned definitions of art are inextricably linked with some much more general theory of art. It is sometimes very difficult, that is, to separate a definition of art from the theory of art that has produced it, or to which it belongs. It is not in most cases, however, impossible. Lastly then, as regards this brief history of the role of definition in the theory of aesthetics: I realize that these explanations of theories and definitions in the history of aesthetics are both selective and oversimplified, but I find such a discussion necessary to help illuminate the great influence that Weitz’s antiessentialist arguments had on the aesthetic community, and to illuminate why so many philosophers immediately objected to his arguments. After

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1 For more information on Kant’s theory see: his *Critique of Judgment* and perhaps H.E. Allison’s *Kant’s Theory of Taste* and P. Guyer’s *Kant and the Claims of Taste*; for more information on expressionist theories see: Tolstoy, Benedetto Croce, R. G. Collingwood, Susanne Langer and Peter Kivy; for more information on formalism see: Clive Bell, A.C. Bradley, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate; and for more information on aesthetic definitions see Monroe C. Beardsley, Nelson Goodman, and Guy Sircello. All of the pertinent books are cited in the bibliography.
all, if Morris Weitz’s arguments and conclusions are right, then aestheticians have from the very beginning engaged in a useless enterprise. It is understandable then that such conclusions would not sit well with many aestheticians.

I have chosen two of the strongest and most influential philosophers from among the many who have rejected Morris Weitz’s antiessentialism on philosophical grounds. They are all contemporaries of Weitz and their arguments are, to the best of my knowledge, the strongest that have been published against antiessentialism since Weitz first published his article in 1956. These two philosophers are Lewis K. Zerby and Joseph Margolis. I have selected from each philosopher essays that directly contest the skepticism and antiessentialism that Weitz puts forth.

The rest of this thesis is accordingly divided into four sections: the first gives a summary and explanation of Morris Weitz’s arguments in “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”, the second treats Zerby’s objections, the third treats Margolis’ objections, and the fourth section concludes with some final remarks about antiessentialism in aesthetic theory, attempts to remedy any unresolved philosophical problems raised in the preceding chapters, and suggests a theory of criticism that is compatible and supported by aesthetic antiessentialism.

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1 There are, of course, many other philosophers who have objected to Weitz’s anti-essentialism. Among them are: Stephen Davies, George Dickie, Arthur Danto, and Jerrold Levinson. These philosophers however, have rejected anti-essentialism by providing alternative definitions. The three philosophers I have selected reject anti-essentialism by attempting to directly refute Weitz’s arguments.
Chapter I  
Morris Weitz’s “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”¹

Weitz begins his article by pointing out that each of the traditional theories of art “claims that it is the true theory because it has formulated correctly into a real definition the nature of art”² and that each theory contends that the others are wrong insofar as they have excluded some necessary or sufficient condition from their definition. But, he observes, “in spite of the many theories, we seem no nearer our goal today than we were in Plato’s time.”³ He states his thesis:

In this essay I want to plead for the rejection of this problem. I want to show that theory—in the requisite classical sense—is never forthcoming in aesthetics, and that we would do much better as philosophers to supplant the question, “What is the nature of art?,” by other questions, the answers to which will provide us with all the understanding of the arts there can be.⁴

Weitz wants to say that philosophers are simply wrong to assume that a correct theory of art is possible, and that such assumptions misconstrue the logic of the concept ‘art’. One may note here that Weitz does not seem to distinguish between the different meanings of ‘theory’ and ‘definition’, as he often uses the terms interchangeably. I think though, that upon closer inspection it is clear that Weitz intends both words to mean ‘a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the term ‘art’’. Certainly this must be the case, because in the above quote Weitz qualifies

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¹ I have included this chapter, a brief exposition of Weitz’s arguments, for the benefit of those readers who may be unfamiliar with his article.
³ Ibid., p. 27
⁴ Ibid., p. 27
‘theory’ as theory in the requisite classical sense, by which I take him to mean nothing but an Aristotelian definition.\(^1\)

Weitz then briefly discusses some major schools of aesthetics, including Formalist, Emotionalist, Intuitionist, Organicist, and Voluntarist theories, only to conclude that “all of these sample theories are inadequate in many different ways”\(^2\), citing as his support that each of these theories leaves out some property of art that another takes to be essential. He then goes on to point out that such objections have already been raised, and that his main objective is to show that “aesthetic theory is a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined.”\(^3\)

He begins his argument with the assertion that the questions we ask as philosophers of art should be reconsidered. Instead of asking “What is art?” he suggests we ask “What sort of concept is ‘art’?”\(^4\). He then suggests a model for philosophical analysis based on his interpretation of Ludwig Wittgenstein\(^4\), suggesting that:

> We must not ask, What is the nature of any philosophical x?, or even, according to the semanticist, What does “x” mean?, a transformation that leads to the disastrous interpretation of “art” as a name for some specifiable class of objects; but rather, What is the use of employment of “x”? What does “x” do in the language?\(^5\)

\(^1\) A further discussion of the difference between ‘theory’ and ‘definition’ in Weitz can be found in Chapter II of this thesis.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 29
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 30
\(^4\) See Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Also, Wittgenstein’s philosophy has informed much work in aesthetic theory, most notable that of Susanne Langer, G. L. Hagberg, and Robert Steiner.
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 30
Then, after a short discussion of Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance, upon which he has based his analysis of ‘art’, Weitz writes:

A concept is open if its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible; i.e., if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept to cover this, or to close the concept and invent a new one to deal with the new case and its new property. If necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept can be stated, the concept is a closed one. But this can happen only in logic or mathematics where concepts are constructed and completely defined. It cannot occur with empirically-descriptive and normative concepts unless we arbitrarily close them by stimulating the ranges of their uses.

Having stated what he means by ‘open concept’ and expressed his view that ‘art’ is an open concept, Weitz moves on, following his Wittgensteinian model, to analyze the term ‘art’ as it occurs in our language by considering the novel. He points out that, historically, many works of art have come to be considered novels that were originally excluded from that genre, particularly stream of consciousness novels like those of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Then, extending his analysis, he produces a formulaic description of what happens when such anomalous works are subsumed into an already established artistic genre or category. He writes of some possible new literary work that:

It is narrative, fictional, contains character delineation and dialogue but (say) it has no regular time-sequence in the plot or is interspersed with actual newspaper reports. It is like recognized novels A, B, C…, in some respects but not like them in others. But then neither were B and C like A in some respects when it was decided to extend the concept applied to A, B, and C. Because N + 1 (the brand new work) is like A, B, C… N in certain respects—has strands of similarity to them—the concept is extended and a new phase of the novel

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1 See sections 66-73 of the Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein’s own discussion of family resemblance.

2 Ibid., p. 31
engendered. “Is N 1 a novel?” then, is no factual, but rather a decision problem, where the verdict turns on whether or not we enlarge our set of conditions for applying the concept.\(^1\)

He then concludes his argument by stating that what is true of the novel is true of every sub-concept of art and that “the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties.”\(^2\)

Weitz concludes his article by arguing that the concept ‘art’ is both descriptive and evaluative and that the logic of the descriptive aspect of the concept functions according to what he calls “criteria of recognition”, that is, “bundles of properties, none of which need be present but most of which are”\(^3\) when we describe works of art. Of the evaluative use of the concept ‘art’, Weitz has no objections so long as using the term ‘art’ to praise a particular object does not entail true, real definitions that provide necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifying artworks at such.

But, after all this negative explanation of why traditional aesthetics has been on a useless wild goose chase, Weitz ends on a very positive note, pointing out the value of definitions of art. He sketches a sort of pragmatic theory of the value of such definitions as he believes to have shown false:

But what makes them—these honorific definitions—so supremely valuable is not their disguised linguistic recommendation; rather it is the *debates* over the reasons for changing the criteria of the concept of art which are built into the definitions. In each of the great theories of art, whether correctly understood as honorific definitions or incorrectly accepted as real definitions, what is of the utmost importance are the reasons proffered in the argument for the

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 32
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 32
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 33
respective theory, that is, the reasons given for the chosen or preferred criterion of excellence and evaluation.¹

In short, definitions of art, although they cannot be true, are useful insofar as they provide art appreciators with new and insightful ways of thinking about artworks.

Having this explanation of Weitz’s arguments and method then, it should be clear why so many philosophers responded with such diverse objections: Weitz has essentially tried to do away with the project of traditional aesthetics all together. Aestheticians would understandably object. Let us turn our focus now to one of the earliest dissenters, Lewis K. Zerby.

¹ Ibid., p. 35
Chapter II
Lewis K. Zerby’s “A Reconsideration of the Role of the Theory in Aesthetics. A Reply to Morris Weitz”

Of the three philosophers that I have chosen as representative of the various objections against Weitz’s anti-essentialism, the earliest is Lewis K. Zerby, who published an article titled “A Reconsideration of the Role of the Theory in Aesthetics. A Reply to Morris Weitz” in 1957, just one year after Weitz published his own article.

Zerby begins by saying of Weitz’s article that it is so basic that “philosophers must either agree with it or criticize it.”¹ This claim grossly misrepresents the complexity of Weitz’s arguments. With this initial oversimplification of Wetiz in mind, let us move on to Zerby’s first objection. Zerby writes:

Suppose we imagine a philosopher saying, “It is more fruitful to ask ‘What sort of concept is probability?’ than to ask ‘What is the nature of probability?’” I do not think that we would be tempted to say to such a man, “Probability is not a word and not a concept, though we may refer to probability by means of the word ‘probability’ and conceive it.”²

He then concludes his first section by pointing out that Weitz is not concerned with the word “art” as either a grammarian or a logician might be, but rather that he is “concerned with the word “art” as Carnap, for example, might be concerned with the word “probability.””³

As a conceptual analogy, we have Weitz coupled with Carnap and ‘art’ coupled with ‘probability’. Now, this might at first seem reasonable as an argument from analogy, but upon analysis the analogy is simply too unclear to be taken

² Ibid., p. 253
³ Ibid., p. 253
seriously. In short, we have to way of knowing what Zerby means by “the way Carnap might be concerned with the word ‘probability’”. Carnap attempts to provide a real definition of probability that resolves the circularity of the classical definitions.\(^1\) Weitz, on the other hand, is doing the exact opposite, that is, showing that no real definition of art is possible. It is difficult to make a case that this is a false analogy, but it clearly lends no support to Zerby simply because it is so unclear.

So Zerby has begun his string of objections by referring to the basic qualities of Weitz’s article and providing a conceptual analogy that complicates matters to no end. His analogy adds nothing to his later objections and nothing to the discussion of theory in aesthetics generally. Zerby’s final allusion to the work of Rudolph Carnap, if anything, obscures Weitz’s own claims and the arguments for those claims. That Carnap worked to show that a theory of probability could justify certain uses of inductive logic has nothing to do with Weitz trying to show that there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions to qualify objects as artworks. The whole passage, the whole first part of Zerby’s article, does nothing but complicate Weitz’s philosophical points. That said, let us disregard this and move on to Zerby’s first really sensible objection. Zerby writes:

Is it not the case that Weitz is making a kind of definition of art in his answer to the question, “What is the logic of ‘x’ as a work of art?” And just as it seems to me that definition is in place, not only in aesthetics in general, but even in this particular paper by Weitz, so it seems to me that analysis is similarly in place.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Carnap’s treatment of probability can be found in summary in his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, particularly Chapter 2. It is presented at length in his book *Logical Foundations of Probability*.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 253
Zerby’s objection is that Weitz provides a definition of art by providing a description of the logic of the term ‘art’. This objection, one of the most common objections against Weitz, will come throughout this paper in many diverse forms. The only reasonable defense is to point out that Weitz is only concerned with whether a real definition in the Aristotelian sense is possible, or as he himself puts it, “real or any kind of true definition”.\(^1\) It should be clear enough then that when Weitz gives a description of the concept ‘art’ or a description of the logic of the concept ‘art’ he is certainly not giving a definition of the kind he intends to disprove the possibility of. In fact, it would be very difficult for any philosopher to construe the meaning of the word ‘definition’ to include what Weitz is doing—namely, giving a description of a thing. It is true that sometimes a description of a thing can serve as a definition of it, but that is clearly not what Weitz intends.

Zerby, foreseeing the very sort of explanation I have just given, goes on to his next objection:

It strikes me that Weitz has put forward the sort of real definition for the term “real definition” that he objects to having theorists in aesthetics put forward for the term “art”. Is not the term “real definition” an open concept? Is it not indeed as expansive and as adventuresome as the concept “art”? Why, then, should we make it a closed concept by defining it as “the statement of the necessary and sufficient properties” of the definiendum?\(^2\)

This will at first seem like a difficult objection to counter. After all, Weitz himself asserts that the sort of definition he is concerned with is a real definition and, as it


turns out, a real definition only in the Aristotelian sense. But let us look closely at Weitz’s method and see what is really happening. He writes:

Let us now survey briefly consider some of the more famous extant aesthetic theories in order to see if they do incorporate correct and adequate statements about the nature of art. In each of these there is the assumption that it is the true enumeration of the defining properties of art, with the implication that previous theories have stressed wrong definitions.¹

Weitz then goes on to discuss the Formalist theory of Bell and Fry, the Emotionalist replies of Tolstoy and Ducasse, the Intuitionist theory of Croce, Bradley’s Organicist theory and Parker’s Voluntarist theory, and in his discussion of each of these historical theories, he points out the necessary and sufficient condition(s) that each theory stipulates for its definition of “art”. Significant form, “i.e. certain combinations of lines, colors, shapes, volumes—everything on the canvas except the representation elements” for the Formalist; a ‘projection of emotion into some piece of stone or words or sounds, etc.” for the Emotionalist; the private, “creative, cognitive and spiritual act” of the artist for the Intuitionist; a “class of organic wholes consisting of distinguishable, albeit inseparable, elements in their causally efficacious relations which are presented in some sensuous medium” for the Organicist; and finally, the “theory that art is essentially three things: embodiment of wishes and desired imaginatively satisfied, language, which characterizes the public medium of art, and harmony, which unifies the language with the layers of imaginative projections” the Voluntarist.²

² Ibid., pp. 28-9
Now, after taking in this brief discussion of the role of definition in aesthetic theory historically, it should be clear that Weitz is not, as Zerby charges, closing the term ‘definition’, but merely describing the kind of definitions that traditional aesthetics has tried to give. Weitz nowhere says anything close to: “A ‘definition’ is the statement of the necessary and sufficient properties of the definiendum.” Rather, Weitz says something more like: Historically, aesthetics has attempted to give the sort of definition for ‘art’ that states the necessary and sufficient properties of it. Weitz is not simply closing the otherwise open concept “definition”, if it even is an open concept, but pointing out that traditional aesthetic theories have been misguided in putting forth this kind of definition. That is, Weitz is not defining ‘definition’, but pointing out that real definitions have been defined and employed in such-and-such a way by philosophers and aestheticians. There may be other kinds of definitions besides Aristotelian real definitions that might get closer to defining art, but this begs the question at hand: whether art can be defined by such definitions. Zerby has the idea of defining art by other kinds of definitions in mind when he quotes this passage from Weitz’s 1949 article “Analysis and Real Definition” in which Weitz describes Aristotelian real definitions, then goes on to suggest another kind of definition:

[...] there is another sense of real definition, the common sense one, which is that kind of definition in which the properties of a given complex are enumerated; by properties is meant the elements or terms of a complex, together with their characteristics and the relations that obtain among them, and by complex, a fact or a group of facts.¹

And Zerby goes on to write that it is his own opinion “that the role of theory in aesthetics is to provide this sort of real definition and that such definitions”\(^1\) are more useful than Weitz makes them out to be. But let us take a moment to really think about what this sort of common sense real definition would look like for the term ‘art’.

First of all, in order for aesthetics to provide a definition of the term ‘art’, art would have to be a complex, i.e. a fact or a group of facts. I am not sure exactly what Weitz means here by ‘fact’, but I doubt that art would fall into the category of the sort of things susceptible to this kind of commonsense real definition. But let us, for the sake of argument, suppose that ‘art’ is a fact or a group of facts. It would still seem impossible to enumerate the properties of it. Let us go back to Weitz for a moment. He writes that a concept is open when its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible. If ‘art’ is a complex, then the facts of which it is composed must be actual artworks and the properties of those artworks. Now if the properties, i.e. the elements or terms of a complex together with their characteristics and the relations that obtain among them, comprise a constantly changing, always corrigible set of things, then it follows that the common sense real definition, namely the conjunction of all those properties, would also comprise a constantly changing, always corrigible set of predicates. This, it seems, would be an ultimately useless definition. After all, what is the theoretical or practical value of a constantly changing definition that defines a constantly changing group of things? With this sort of definition too, we will be no closer to the nature of art than the mimetic theorists were thousands of years ago. My point is that, although this sort of common sense real definition might work for some

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 254
things, say ‘chair’ or ‘apple’ or even ‘baseball game’, the kind of concept that art is simply defies even this sort of definition.

Ultimately, Zerby concludes his article by outlining a proposed agenda for aesthetic theorists. Although his agenda does not concern us here, he does make two points that I think are worth mentioning insofar as they are pertinent to Weitz and the arguments of the antiessentialist. Zerby writes: “I do not believe we should say that because we have no complete definition of art’s essence, we have no definition at all of art.”¹ I agree with Zerby’s point here, but I want to point out in the defense of antiessentialism that it also does not follow from the fact that no complete definition of the essence of art is possible that we do not have any definition of art. As Weitz has already pointed out: we have plenty of definitions of art! They are an attempt to state and justify criteria which are either neglected or distorted by previous definitions. They are just all partly wrong, or as Weitz would say, they are honorific definitions.

The last point I want to dwell on is directly related to the previous point: Zerby says that without “an understanding of the signification of the term ‘art’, how can we write histories, or sociologies, or criticisms of art?”² First, it does not follow from the fact that we have no complete definition of art that we do not understand the signification of the term ‘art’. We use the term successfully every day. Children and critics and aesthetic theorist do not often have difficulty identifying an artwork from a non artwork. In fact, the following thought experiment by William E. Kennick speaks to this very point:

¹ Ibid, p. 255
² Ibid, p. 255
Imagine a very large warehouse filled with all sorts of things—pictures of every description, musical scores for symphonies and dances and hymns, machines, tools, boats, houses, churches and temples, statues, vases, books of poetry and of prose, furniture and clothing, newspapers, postage stamps, flowers, trees, stones, musical instruments. Now we instruct someone to enter the warehouse and bring out all of the works of art it contains. He will be able to do this with reasonable success, despite the fact that, as even aestheticians must admit, he possesses no satisfactory definition of ‘art’ in terms of some common denominator because no such definition has yet been found.¹

That is to say simply that the fact that we have no definition of art, whether one exists or not, in no way precludes even the non-expert from correctly recognizing artworks and distinguishing artworks from non artworks.

In the end, much of Zerby’s criticism is well thought out and craftily constructed, but it is also easily refuted. Philosophers often react to an antiessentialist theory of art at first merely because they interpret the antiessentialist as tossing out, with the essence, the value of art and the discourse surrounding that value. In fact, that we do not have a complete definition of the term ‘art’ does not mean that those incomplete, partially wrong, or honorific definitions are not useful. Weitz himself illustrates this pragmatic point using the Formalist theory as an example:

Art as significant form cannot be accepted as a true, real definition of art […]. But what gives it its aesthetic importance is what lies behind the formula: In an age in which literary and representation elements have become paramount in painting, return to the plastic ones since these are indigenous to painting. Thus, the role of theory is not to define anything but to use the definition form, almost epigrammatically, to pin-point a crucial recommendation to turn our attention once again to the plastic elements in painting.²


The same point could be made about almost any definition or theory of art. So, just as Zerby does not realize that even without a complete definition of art we can still understand the significance of the term, he might not have realized that we can also value those failed historical attempts to provide such a complete definition.
Chapter III
Joseph Margolis’ “Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art”

In 1958, just two years after Morris Weitz published his article advocating anti-essentialism, Joseph Margolis published his article “Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art” in the journal Philosophical Studies. Margolis’ article, although it is clearly divided into eleven objections, often makes the same objection in different ways. My responses therefore may sometimes seem redundant.

Margolis’ article begins by discussing Weitz’s claims, particularly the Wittgensteinian influence on his explanation of open concepts. After quoting Weitz at length to give a proper context to his criticisms, he writes: “I should like to make some systematic observations about Weitz’s charge which, I trust, will show without requiring additional comment, the logical suitability of attempting to define art.”

He then proceeds to the first of his eleven systematic observations, writing:

On Weitz’s view, the error involved in defining art [...] applies to all “empirically-descriptive” concepts and so is not peculiarly to be found in the theory of art. On this basis, the definition of “man” and “tree” and “stone” suffers from the same error. [...] I suggest that what Weitz wishes to say is that the error, when it is found, is found exclusively in the “empirically descriptive” and “normative” domains, though it need not occur in every case in those domains, that it never occurs in logic and mathematics where “concepts are constructed and completely defined.”

We will encounter this very same objection, albeit in a much stronger form, among Margolis’ later objections. The objection is that if an open concept is open by virtue of the corrigibility of its conditions of application, then a great many things outside of...
‘art’ would seem to be open concepts. The objection only gains strength from the ambiguous way that Weitz characterizes open concepts. He says: “A concept is open if its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible” and then goes on to restate the same point in different words, that is: “if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept”\(^1\) Given Weitz’s second explanation of an open concept, it seems that any concept that can admit new and different members would qualify as open; but almost all nouns, except for proper nouns, seem to function this way. Here the anti-essentialist cannot take his queues from Weitz, for his task is to either a) clarify the explanation of an open concept such that it does not extend to all except proper nouns, or b) admit that almost all concepts are in fact open and that almost all definitions are honorific, and explain why some honorific definitions are more stable than others. I am going to take the second route, and go back to Wittgenstein for my support, but let me save this for later in the chapter where Margolis’ similar but much stronger objection will shed more light on the nature of the problem.

Moving on then, Margolis makes his second point, which is simply that he believes Weitz to have correctly described the open character of the concept art, stating that Weitz “does show persuasively that an old-fashioned definition of the novel may exclude, contrary to our wishes, Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*” and that “we therefore decide to adjust the definition to incorporate these”\(^2\) kinds of anomalous cases. He further grants that novels and other subclasses of art are not held together

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\(^1\) Weitz, p. 31

by necessary and sufficient properties but by strands of similarities, in the Wittgensteinian sense, but insists, as his third point, that “to determine whether this is so is an empirical question and not a logical one.”

Margolis wants to point out here that Weitz is taking Wittgenstein’s advice and looking at the concept ‘art’ to see how it functions. Margolis contends that Weitz’s movement from the empirical domain to the logical domain, insofar as Weitz claims that the empirical evidence makes it logically impossible to give a real definition for the word ‘art’ contains a misguided move. The question then is: Can one draw conclusions about the logical nature of a concept with only empirical evidence as support? Margolis thinks not. It seems to me, however, that when one engages in philosophical analysis, one is working within both empirical and logical domains. The empirical does not necessarily exclude the logic and vice versa.

Margolis is right to point out that the process of determining that artworks are connected by strings of similarities and not by necessary and sufficient conditions is a purely empirical process. I do not however agree that once this matter of fact has been established, that it cannot have logical consequences. That is, once we have established that art is an open concept, and that open concepts have such-and-such a logical status, it seems to follow that art should also have such-and-such a logical status. Perhaps we should go back to Weitz here, because I expect that the objection depends heavily on the ambiguity of Weitz’s line of argument.

On a close examination of what Weitz actually says, it seems that he is really putting forward two different arguments: the first concerns the nature of the concept

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1 Ibid., p. 90.
‘art’ and the second concerns the logical nature of the concept ‘open concept’. The first argument depends upon empirical evidence and concludes that art is an open concept, while the second depends only on definitions; that is, the first is empirical and the second logical. The first might be reconstructed thus: 1) A concept is open if its conditions of application are corrigible, as shown by the definition of the term. 2) The conditions of the application of the concept ‘art’ are corrigible, as can be shown by observing the nature of art and the way we have talked about it historically. 3) It follows from these observations then that ‘art’ is an open concept. This argument, you can see, depends only on the definition of ‘open concept’ and the observation of artworks and art-talk. It is an argument founded primarily on empirical evidence.

The second argument can be constructed thus: 1) There are no necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of an open concept, as can be observed from the definition of the term. 2) To provide a real definition of concept X, there must be necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the concept X, as can be observed from the definition of ‘real definition’. 3) It follows from these observations that real definitions cannot be given for open concepts. This argument, on the other hand, depends solely on the definition of the terms ‘open concept’ and ‘real definition’, and is thus a purely logical argument, requiring no empirical evidence. So, to make the point again, when the first argument establishes that ‘art’ is in fact an open concept and the second argument establishes that open

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1 I realize that neither of these arguments is explicitly in Weitz’s article, but because of their ambiguity, the arguments that are there require clarification. This is my clarification, and I don’t think it strays too far from what Weitz does actually say.
concepts cannot be defined according to necessary and sufficient conditions, it follows that ‘art’ cannot be defined according to necessary and sufficient conditions.

Taking these two arguments in stride then, one should see clearly that given the established fact that ‘art’ is an open concept it follows from definitions alone—a purely analytic argument—that ‘art’ cannot logically be defined. We will return to the same objection later however, although this response seems to be the best an anti-essentialist can give to such an objection.

Moving on in a similar vein, Margolis writes:

Weitz appears to confuse in his argument logical and merely practical reasons. For when he explains why it is that “art” is an “open” concept, he says: “We can, of course, choose to close the concept. But to do this with ‘art’ or ‘tragedy’ or ‘portraiture,’ etc., is ludicrous since it forecloses on the very conditions of creativity in the arts.”

Margolis then goes on to point out that “the reason [Weitz] supplies for demurring to definitions is very clearly a practical one” and seems to suggest that this practical support cannot entail the logical conclusion that ‘art’ cannot be defined. It does not seem like confusion on Weitz’s part to me, but more a confusion on Margolis’ part. Weitz maintains that it is sometimes practical or useful to close a concept within the arts, say, for the sake of criticism or in an effort to glean an insightful new understanding of a work, but his reasons for supporting the conclusion that ‘art’ cannot be defined are not practical in any sense of the term. What is actually happening in Weitz is quite the contrary of what Margolis suggests. Whereas Margolis supposes Weitz to be confusing practical and logical reasons in his support

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1 Ibid., p. 90
2 Ibid., p. 90
to demur to definitions, Weitz actually uses empirical and logical reasons to support
demurring to definitions, and uses practical reasons to suggest that sometimes
honorific or incomplete definitions are useful.

Still confounding the logical objections that Weitz sets forth regarding the
impossibility of providing a complete definition of ‘art’ with the practical reasons that
he sets forth regarding the value of honorific definitions, Margolis makes his fifth
point:

The confusion in short rests here: there is a difference between noting the
inadequacy of any formulated definition of art, if we wish to include as art
certain objects that do not share the necessary and sufficient properties listed in
that definition, and (on the other hand) proving logically impossible the
enumeration of necessary and sufficient properties for any set of objects
already agreed upon. It is our practical dissatisfaction with any empirical
definitions of this sort that urges us to revise it, to make a “decision” (as Weitz
would put it).¹

Of course there is a difference between these two tasks. In fact, the point is almost
trivial. It is silly to argue that it is logically impossible to enumerate the necessary and
sufficient properties of any set of objects already agreed upon. The fact is, ‘art’ does
not denote a set of objects already agreed upon. Neither does ‘novel’. Further, as
Weitz has shown and Margolis has agreed, necessary and sufficient conditions for
qualifying objects as artworks certainly will exclude objects that do not share those
necessary and sufficient conditions but that we still want to consider artworks, and this
is precisely why we are doing away with them. In fact, the whole passage quoted
above, while it purports to be an objection to Weitz, is really supportive of Weitz’s
argument. That is, the arguments that motivate doing away with necessary and

¹ Ibid., p. 91
sufficient conditions for qualifying artworks are ultimately logical, and if there is some practical reason at work also to justify such a move, all the better.

Finally, giving up this discussion of empirical versus logical versus practical reason then, Margolis continues on to his sixth objection. He points out that Weitz, given his explanation of open concepts, must be wrong in asserting that closed concepts can only occur in mathematics and logic because:

For even though the concepts there are “constructed”, it is conceivable that, examining the empirical use of these constructions, we “decide” (again for practical reasons) to change the definitions of certain concepts. And this is all that is required to fulfill Weitz’s criterion of an “open” concept.¹

Margolis then goes on to give an illustrative example. We can easily imagine, for example, sometime in the very early stages of mathematical inquiry, some definition of “number” that would not have applied to other entities referred to by the same name in a later stage of development. Margolis then suggests that the process of rejecting the anomalous entities or revising our definition of “number” is essentially the same as the process Weitz suggests for the art theorist.

Remember back now to Margolis’ first objection, that if an open concept is open by virtue of the corrigibility of its conditions of application, then a great many things outside ‘art’ would seem to be open concepts. Here Margolis extends the objection to show that, according to Weitz’s explanation of open concepts, even concepts in the domains of logic and mathematics can qualify as open. Remember also that the task for the anti-essentialist here is to either a) clarify the explanation of ‘open concept’ such that it does not extend to all concepts or b) admit that almost all

¹ Ibid., p. 91
concepts are in fact open and give an explanation of why some are more capable of being defined than others. I will take the second route.

At this point it is necessary to stray well away from Morris Weitz and his arguments. For one thing, we must admit that Weitz is wrong to assert that closed concepts only occur in mathematics and logic, or any discipline that is wholly constructed and contains only terms that are completely defined. As we have seen, it is quite possible that the conditions of application for concepts even in these disciplines can be corrigible, perhaps have even been changed often in the past. But I should point out that to concede this point is not to give up the anti-essentialist view, and as you will see, an anti-essentialist defense will only produce a stronger, more robust sort of anti-essentialism.

First then, the objection rests on the assumption, and I do not object that Weitz uses them just this way, that the two terms ‘open concept’ and ‘closed concept’ mean, respectively, a term which denotes a set whose members are corrigible and a term which denotes a set whose members are not corrigible. Both the terms ‘set’ and ‘members’ here are ambiguous insofar as a set can be a cluster of properties, which properties constitute its members, or a cluster of yet more concepts, which concepts constitute its members. But this ambiguity does not affect my argument. That said, let us ask what sort of term, if any, could be considered closed. Upon inspection it seems that, according to these definitions, the only terms that can be considered closed are proper nouns and nouns with demonstrative adjectives in context. Any other term can denote a set whose members are corrigible. For almost any concept I can imagine,
any term that denotes a set with diverse members, I can also imagine that those members could change; unless there is a proper or demonstrative context in time for which I can secure a set whose members are not corrigible, any term seems to qualify as an open concept.

But there must have been some motivation for Weitz assuming that concepts in mathematics and logic are closed. That is, it does seem like some open concepts are simply easier to provide definitions for than other open concepts. The necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the term ‘number’ for example are just less disputable than the necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the term ‘man’ or ‘game’. The only way to explain these points is to reconsider our understanding of the nature of an ‘open concept’.

When we characterize open and closed concepts respectively as a term which denotes a set whose members are corrigible and a term which denote a set whose members are not corrigible we suggest a sort of binary distinction. Both Weitz and Margolis, and everyone else I am familiar with who discusses open concepts, seem to be working with the implicit understanding that there are two kinds of concepts: open ones and closed ones. I am not suggesting that there are concepts that are neither open nor closed, merely that the way philosophers have so far talked of open and closed concepts suggests that once we determine that a particular concept is open or closed, it is the end of the discussion. I am surprised that no one has pointed out that, at least when it comes to open concepts, there must be degrees of openness. The very terminology we use to discuss such concepts suggests that there is a matter of degree.
When I say that one concept is more open than another, it simply means that the necessary and sufficient conditions that govern its application are more corrigible. It seems clear then that if this is the case then the necessary and sufficient conditions which govern the use of less open concepts will be more stable and vice versa. This, in turn, explains why concepts in mathematics and logic may seem closed at first glance but upon further investigation we find that the conditions of application which govern their use are just less likely to change.

Let us look at a few examples. Morris Weitz builds his explanation of an open concept upon the ideas set forth in these passages from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*¹:

> For if you look at them [games] you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look!—Look for example at board games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card games; here you may find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.²

> I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ for a family.³

Wittgenstein’s points about the nature of games are very convincing. It is difficult to imagine a really convincing argument that could refute the idea that the term ‘game’ does not denote an open concept, or that necessary and sufficient conditions could

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¹ These passages are not the only passages that contain discussion of family resemblance. These two, however, are fairly representative of the whole. See particularly sections 66-73 of the *Philosophical Investigations*.


³ Ibid., pp. 27-28
govern its application. Similarly, and Margolis himself agrees with the point, the concept that the term ‘art’ denotes shares the same properties. But I mention these two concepts as open concepts merely to point out that they comprise, with many other concepts surely, one end of a spectrum. They are the most open concepts one can come by. The members of the set denoted by each term change often and drastically. There are other concepts though, that rest in some middle ground between the concept ‘game’ and the concept ‘number’.

Remember back to Margolis’ first point, where he objects that, given Weitz’s explanation of open concepts, even terms like ‘man’ and ‘tree’ could be considered open. A consideration of these two concepts should show that Margolis is right, that they are in fact open, but that they are less open than concepts like ‘game’ and ‘art’. For example, archeologists have often had difficulty classifying subspecies of the genus homo. Some have considered the homo neanderthalensis a subspecies of the species homo sapiens while others have not. Their reason is either that the homo neanderthalensis exhibits enough similarities to the homo sapiens to qualify as man or it does not. In the first case, the necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the term ‘man’ might have to change, while in the second case we simply decide not to extend the definition. Similarly with the term ‘tree’, we can easily imagine a situation in which I call a particular tall green plant a bush while you insist that it is a tree. The verdict will depend on whether one of us decides to revise our concept of bush or tree. These sorts of cases do often come about, they are just more rare because the concepts ‘man’ and ‘tree’ are just less open. We are less likely
to disagree whether said green plant is a bush or a tree than we are to disagree about whether a painting that does not represent anything can qualify as art.

So now that we have sketched out the middle ground, let us move on to the concepts that terms like ‘number’ and ‘addition’ denote, which brings us to the other end of the spectrum. But I should not have to dwell too much on the point. Sure, as Margolis points out, there are imaginable situations in which the necessary and sufficient conditions that govern the application of the term ‘number’ might change, but they are rare. Similarly for terms like ‘addition’, ‘logical entailment’ and ‘sum’. These terms are simply less open.

So to finally answer the question that we set out to answer by scrutinizing various open concepts: some open concepts are more susceptible to definitions simply because they are less open, because the necessary and sufficient conditions which govern their application are less likely to change. It is probably pertinent here to point out the definitions for open concepts, no matter how stable or unstable, are always what Weitz would call honorary definitions, that is, useful tools to help organize theoretical talk but ultimately incomplete, ultimately wrong. But one should see too that these conclusions support a more robust anti-essentialism than Weitz puts forth, although foundationally the same. Almost all concepts are open, but the various definitions we draw for them are still valuable and useful. For the anti-essentialist, this should more than suffice to take care of Margolis’ objection that even concepts in mathematics and logic are open. After all, it does not remain an objection when we point out that it supports a more robust version of our original anti-essentialism.
Finally, we can move on to Margolis’ seventh objection, which is much simpler to deal with. He briefly discusses Weitz’s argument that when we read something like *Finnegan’s Wake* we are forced to make a decision to either revise our definition of ‘novel’ to include the work or create a new concept to classify the work, then points out that such a line of reasoning “presupposes in a subterranean way that we are, in some sense, able to grasp the eternal forms of things.”¹ This simply does not make sense. That one reads *Finnegan’s Wake* and must make a decision about how to classify it within an artistic genre in no way presupposes an eternal form of the novel. Margolis wants to suggest that because we recognize something, say *Finnegan’s Wake* as a novel, we must have some knowledge of novel-hood, or novel-ness, or some such thing. To the contrary, since we have no real knowledge of such things, we have to make a decision whether to classify the artwork as such or not. That is, we do not know that *Finnegan’s Wake* is a novel before we expand our definition of the term to include it.

Margolis phrases his eighth objection thus:

The notion of “family resemblances” is at best an empirical compromise; having failed to arrive at a satisfactory definition, we are inclined to think none can be formulated […]. But this is to transform an empirical finding […] into the strongest logical objection.²

Here we have again the objection that logical conclusions cannot be drawn from purely empirical evidence. At the risk of being redundant, I will point out again here that Weitz actually puts forward two different arguments: the first concerns the nature

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² Ibid., p. 92
of the concept ‘art’ and the second concerns the logical nature of the concept ‘open concept’. The first argument depends upon empirical evidence and concludes that art is an open concept, while the second depends only on definitions; that is, the first is empirical and the second purely logical. It has already been shown too that if we establish the fact that ‘art’ is an open concept and that an open concept cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions, it follow that ‘art’ cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions either.

The rest of Margolis’ objections, much like the previous, are redundant. Margolis ends on a note though, which I think is useful to briefly consider: “I believe that Weitz’s argument founders on the objections enumerated. And since the definitional effort in question is not self-contradictory and resembles other such efforts that are both meaningful and successful, I say simply try again.”¹ As we have seen, Weitz’s argument probably does not founder on Margolis’ objections. But what I want to point out there, much like in the concluding statements of the previous chapter, is that Margolis’ point that other tasks much like the search for a definition of art are meaningful and successful suggests that Weitz finds the search for such a definition meaningless. This, I must say again, is a crooked attitude toward the kind of anti-essentialism we are dealing with. Weitz does find value and meaning in all the various theories and definitions of art, he simply sees them clearly for what they are: useful tools to help us make sense of the diverse aesthetic objects we want to call ‘art’.

¹ Ibid., p. 95
Chapter IV
Toward a Pragmatic Anti-essentialism

So far in thesis I have dedicated discussion exclusively to the objections that Zerby and Margolis have brought against Weitz’s anti-essentialism. As mentioned in the introduction, Weitz’s article found widespread dissent among the philosophical community at its time of publication, and has ever since engendered lively discussion on the topic of defining art generally. Having shown in the previous chapters that the initial objections of Zerby and Margolis can be refuted by a robust anti-essentialist aesthetic and semantic theory, I want to dedicate this concluding chapter at least in part to some other possible objections to Weitz’s anti-essentialism, some of which have appeared in aesthetic literature over the past fifty years and some of which have been brought to my attention by friends and colleagues working in analytic aesthetics.

Professor Scott Carson of Ohio University has pointed out what I will here call the convertibility problem. When Weitz maintains that the application of the term ‘art’ is governed not by necessary and sufficient conditions but by bundles of resemblances some of which may be present but none of which must be present, the result that artworks do not necessarily have to have any single property in common means that art can be convertible with being, and vice versa. That is to say, if no single common property is necessary for an artwork to be an artwork, artwork-ness becomes indistinguishable from simply existing, in which case the anti-essentialist term ‘art’ become trivial insofar as it is applicable to anything at any time under any circumstances.
Two rebuttals can be given in response to the convertibility problem. The first is to simply drop the view that no single commonality is necessary, and to maintain instead that at least one commonality between one artwork and another must be shared, although the nature of that commonality need not be specified in any way whatsoever. Such a response subtly revises Weitz’s philosophical position, but not so much as to change the underlying aesthetic anti-essentialism. Another, perhaps more reasonable response is to claim that artworks must be artifacts, and that artifacuality serves to distinguish artworks from existence. In this case, we have provided at least one necessary condition for qualifying artworks, although we have not provided jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifying artworks, and still the robust anti-essentialist view is maintained. I would probably be more inclined to take the second route and say simply that artworks must at least be artifacts, but I leave any final conclusion on the convertibility problem for future research.

Another possible objection to anti-essentialist aesthetics points out that if our ability to predicate artwork-ness on objects is contingent on artworks sharing one or more properties that resemble each other, then how is it possible that the first artwork should have been identified as such, there being no previous artworks with which to compare it? I will call this the first artwork objection.

At first glance, the objection seems gravely serious for anti-essentialist position, simply because it seems the theory precludes the possibility of a first artwork. Upon closer inspection, however, the objection becomes less serious. The anti-essentialist needs merely to propose an intermediary phase between a time in
which there were no artworks and a time in which there were artworks—a time period which might be called the proto-artwork period, in which proto-artworks were produced and which retrospectively were termed artworks in light of their resemblance to real artworks. This, I will call the evolutionary response to the first artwork objection, and I think it is sufficient to explain the problem.

One final problem which I think deserves mention is a much broader objection to the possibility of classifying objects according to family resemblance in general. That is, everything resembles everything else in at least some minor sense. ‘Everything’ and ‘everything else’ for example resemble each other at least insofar as they appear in the same (preceding) sentence, but we would not be inclined to classify the two terms on these grounds alone. Steven Davies puts the problem well when he writes that “in the absence of some way of specifying a restriction on the class within which resemblance is to be sought, or in the kinds and degrees of resemblances that are to be counted, resemblance is a notion that is useless as a basis for classification.”

This general objection to the usefulness of the notion of family resemblance for classifying objects is, I admit, a difficult objection for the anti-essentialist—or for any other Wittgensteinian theorist—to respond to effectively. I do not have the time or space to treat such an objection, but I suspect that that the resolution will be found in the positing of a paradigm artwork, or a group of paradigm artworks, much like Paul Ziff does in his similarly anti-essentialist aesthetic theory. Ziff maintains that there are groups of paradigm artworks which novel artworks must resemble to a

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2 See Paul Ziffs article “The Task of Defining a Work of Art” in the January 1953 issue of The Philosophical Review.
certain extent to qualify as such. Such a response would still have to place restrictions or limitations on the extent of the resemblance in order to classify artworks as such, but by having a group of paradigm artworks such restrictions become much more reasonable.

I point out the following objections less in order to solve them, although for each I have hinted at some possible responses, but more in order to show that the debate between aesthetic essentialism and anti-essentialism is alive and well to this day, and that much literature on the subject continues to be published in a variety of useful and helpful articles and books. The three aforementioned objections—the convertibility problem, the first artwork objection, and the restricted resemblance objection—might be thought of as points for future research. No matter on which side of the essentialist/anti-essentialist debate a person might stand, these key issues deserve the scrutiny of rigorous philosophical minds.

In conclusion, I want to return to a point that I have touched on at various points throughout this thesis. In an attempt to lay the groundwork for what I would like to call a pragmatic anti-essentialist aesthetics I would like to return to what I see as the thoroughly positive aspect of Weitz’s arguments and conclusions. As discussed in the introduction and elsewhere, many philosophers have seen Wietz’s anti-essentialism as ultimately negative, undermining the agendas of every aesthetician since Plato and Aristotle. In a sense, his argument in negative insofar as it does undermine much work in aesthetic theory since ancient times. But in a much more important sense I find his arguments positive, insofar as they give value to the diverse
aesthetic theories which they undermine, and to the very processes by which those
theories are built. With this in mind, let us look again at some of Weitz’s concluding
statements.

After drawing a distinction between the descriptive use and the evaluative use
of the term ‘art’, Weitz writes:

There is nothing wrong with the evaluative use; in fact, there is good reason for
using “Art” to praise. But what cannot be maintained is that theories of the
evaluative use of “Art” are real definitions of the necessary and sufficient
properties of art. Instead, there are honorific definitions, pure and simple, in
which “Art” has been redefined in terms of chosen criteria.¹

This idea should by now be familiar enough to the reader. What I want to dwell on is
the point that Weitz makes when he writes that what makes these honorific definitions
so supremely valuable is “not their disguised linguistic recommendations; rather, it is
the debates over the reasons for changing the criteria of the concept of art which are
built into the definitions.”² He goes on to write:

It is the perennial debate over these criteria of evaluation which makes the
history of aesthetic theory the important study it is. The value of each of the
theories resides in its attempt to state and to justify certain criteria which are
either neglected or distorted by previous theories.³

This then, is where the positive aspect of Weitz’s otherwise negative philosophical
agenda surfaces. And although it is only a hint, I think the suggestions he proposes in
these passages point to an aesthetic theory and a theory of criticism that not only
justifies both art and criticism, but gives a new and important value to both. The

² Ibid. p 35.
³ Ibid. p 35.
following conclusion is a consideration of both the aesthetic theory and the theory of criticism that Weitz suggests, but does not explicitly state.

The aesthetic theory, as we have seen, basically holds that while there are is no final set of necessary and sufficient conditions to qualify artworks as such, there are a number of different set of conditions which artists and critics draw up to qualify artworks, and they overlap and change over time as new artworks are created, new genres are created, and new way to discuss and appreciate artworks appear. While we will never be able to say exactly and with absolute precision what art is, we nevertheless understand artworks according to that diverse array of various criteria for defining them.

Perhaps more interesting, the theory of criticism which Weitz’s concluding comments suggest follows from the premises of his aesthetic theory. That is, the very fact that there are no ultimate necessary and sufficient conditions to qualify artworks gives value to the critical process of drawing up and debating such conditions. Criticism, that is, serves a mediator between the ongoing process of artistic production and the public appreciation (or sometimes not) of the artworks produced.

In conclusion then, we can see that while a thoroughly anti-essentialist aesthetic theory is negative in one sense, it is positive in another much more important sense. While it undermines the presuppositions of almost every aesthetic theory in history, it simultaneously provides each of those theories with value. As competing theories of what qualifies artworks as such engender valuable new ways of thinking about and assessing art, our appreciation of the variety of artworks grows deeper and
more valuable. The anti-essentialist does not insist that all theories of art are wrong and then simply leave the discussion; to the contrary, the anti-essentialist insists that no single correct theory of art is possible, but that the value of all artworks and art criticism comes from process of debate amongst all the various theories.
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