

ESSENCE AND ANTI-ESSENTIALISM ABOUT ART

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Confusion surrounding the topic of essence is a neglected source of trouble in the debate about the nature of art. This confusion obscures the issues relevant to the debate by inviting poor arguments for and against anti-essentialism about anything, including about art. More perniciously, it interferes with clearly focusing on the very concept of art about which an anti-essentialist position makes good sense. This concept of art is interesting in its own right, I think, and at the very least, it would be useful to get it properly distinguished from any other concept plausibly expressed by our word 'art'.

I propose to bracket the problem of the nature of art for the first two sections; here, I will be concerned only to remove certain confusions about essence that tend to muddy the water before one dives into the special problems of the nature of art. In the third section, I use the results of the previous discussion to isolate a particular evaluative concept of art, and describe some of its interest. In the final section, I argue that anti-essentialism about *this* concept of art is a plausible, though incomplete, doctrine.

I. ESSENCE

As a touchstone for our inquiry into essence, consider the contrast between a person saying, ‘May I have a glass of water without any ice?’ and a person saying, ‘May I have a glass of water without any H₂O?’ In the second case, but not in the first, there is an unavoidable question about what the person is *doing*. It is possible that they are asking for something, but don’t understand the word ‘water’, or don’t know that ‘H₂O’ is the chemical description of water. Probably, they aren’t really asking for anything at all, and are simply making a joke. Still, the need for *some* interpretation arises from the fact that nothing would count as a glass of water without any H₂O, hence ‘Water is H₂O’ provides a clear example of a statement about the nature of some sort of thing.

This is familiar ground. Its very familiarity, however, masks misunderstandings that tend to obscure the issue when we turn to the special question of whether art has a nature. To unmask these sources of trouble, we must delve a little more deeply into thought about a thing’s nature.

Everyone will agree, I suppose, that questions about essence direct us to provide an account of what is necessary to being some sort of thing—let’s call it a K. But what is it to have an account of what is necessary to being a K? To start very modestly, it is at least to have a true sentence running, ‘Ks are such-and-such’. Of course, not every truth about Ks is a necessary truth, but before worrying about this, two remarks about the empty slot in our formula are in order.

First, it is clear that ‘such-and-such’ might be filled in with terms designating properties, features, parts, activities, conditions, and even *kinds* of property, etc. For example, there is no reason to say that ‘have aesthetic properties’ or ‘have properties thought of as valuable within some culture’, fail as necessary conditions merely because the particular properties are not, and maybe *cannot* be, listed out once and for all.¹ Second, for the purposes of this discussion, I will allow that what fills up the ‘such-and-such’ slot may be a condition of some logical complexity, a long disjunction, perhaps, or a disjunction of conjunctions. In allowing this, however, we commit ourselves to understanding disjunctive theories of art as essentialist, which runs against the understanding of many of the proponents of those theories. For example, both Robert Stecker’s historical-functionalism and Berys Gaut’s cluster concept account are explicitly proposed as *anti*-essentialist.² While there is some intuitive pull to the idea that disjunctive accounts are anti-essentialist accounts, the idea that the disjunction proposed by such theories *is* the

¹ I take it that this is part of Marcia Muelder Eaton’s point in *both* suggesting that what we *say* about works of art will not yield a definition *and* offering a definition in terms of what has intrinsic properties that are thought valuable within the work’s cultural setting. See ‘A Sustainable Definition of “Art”’, in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), especially pp. 142-146.

² For Stecker’s main discussion of historical-functionalism, see *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1996), Part I. He remarks that historical-functionalism is an anti-essentialist theory of art in, ‘Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art’, in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 60. For Gaut’s cluster concept account, see, “Art” as a Cluster Concept’, in Carroll (*ibid.*), but compare pp. 27 -28 with pp. 32-33.

proposed necessary condition also has some intuitive grip. After all, if one doesn't understand that jade is *either* jadeite or nephrite, then, arguably, one doesn't understand what jade *is*, in a suitably pregnant sense. Caution would therefore incline one to admit logically complex conditions into the realm of necessary conditions.

Let us return to the issue passed over a moment ago: securing a true sentence that runs 'Ks are such-and-such' does not by itself ensure that being such-and-such belongs in an account of the nature of a K. Indeed, part of the point of an account of essence is that it gives content to the distinction between what a K is merely accidentally or by happenstance or contingently, and what a K is *necessarily*. That is, an account of the nature of a K is supposed to articulate what an individual thing *must* be, if it is a K.

So far, so good. Now, if we are thinking about the necessary connection between being some water and being some H₂O, the obvious way to flesh out the notion of what a thing 'must be if it is a K' is to suppose that the account includes only those characteristics without which something is *not* a K—period. This is why there is an *unavoidable* question about what the person is doing in saying, 'A glass of water please, only hold the H₂O'. To put the point in terms of inference, a predicative expression, 'is F', gives us a necessary condition of being a K if and only if 'This isn't F' implies 'This isn't a K'. Later, I will argue that this sort of necessary connection is not the only sort. However, since the sort that authorizes a move from 'not F' to 'not a K' (which, for ease of exposition, I will continue calling 'necessary'), has been a main target for anti-essentialists about art, it is helpful to root

out some persistent misunderstandings of necessary conditions before moving into less familiar territory.

To focus the discussion, recall that an anti-essentialist (about Ks) need not hold that there are no necessary conditions for being a K *at all*. The anti-essentialist must hold that, in principle, the necessary conditions of being a K fail, in some way, to amount to an account of the concept of a K. The anti-essentialist is therefore committed to holding that necessary conditions play less of a role in our language and thought than the essentialist thinks. Hence, it is crucial that the anti-essentialist's argument does not imply that necessary conditions are rarer birds than they in fact are, for such a result would wreck the argument for anti-essentialism about Ks at the very beginning. The confusions about necessary conditions I am about to discuss do precisely this sort of damage within the debate about art.

A well-canvassed mistake of this sort, suggested by some of Morris Weitz's remarks, is the move from the claim that new forms of, say, the novel are constantly possible to the claim that there are no necessary conditions of being a novel. To have straightforward relevance to the problem of art, the point needs to be quite general; understood as quite general, however, the argument is easily refuted by example: it does not follow from the fact that new strategies in chess are constantly possible that there are no necessary (and jointly sufficient) conditions for being a strategy in chess.³

³ For the claim, see M. Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 14 (1956), pp. 27-35; reprinted widely. For an excellent overview of the debate about Weitz's various arguments, see S. Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1991), pp. 15-18.

A related source of trouble, though one not as fastidiously resisted, is conflation of conceptual analysis with what might usefully be called ‘conceptual history.’⁴ Conceptual history involves tracking, and maybe explaining, the change of concepts over time. Conceptual analysis, on the other hand, is a different activity all together. It concerns whether (or not) the target concept—be it one in use now or not—involves necessary conditions, and if so, what they are, etc. One is likely to confuse analysis with history if one fails to notice that conceptual history presupposes that the work of conceptual analysis *has already been done*. This is because one of the marks that a word no longer expresses the concept it once did is that the conditions necessary for something to be truly described by the word have changed. A bland example will make the contrast clear. Not very long ago (as these things go), to say, ‘I want neither fish nor foul nor flesh in my meat,’ may have been odd, but was not unintelligible. At present, however, such a statement drops to the ground in precisely the same way as does, ‘Some water please, only without the H₂O’. Observing the change, one who runs conceptual history together with conceptual analysis might conclude that being animal flesh is not a necessary condition of being meat. And since the possibility of such changes is nearly ubiquitous, one ends up with a very few necessary conditions indeed. But the whole argument is a fallacy; ‘meat’ is simply a noun that, due to the historical circumstances, expresses a different concept now than it did formerly.

⁴ Two clear examples are R. Kamber, ‘Weitz Reconsidered: A Clearer View of Why Theories of Art Fail’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 38 (1998), pp. 33-55; and F. Sparshott, ‘Art and Anthropology’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 55 (1997), pp. 239-244.

Finally, one ends up with a bloated anti-essentialism if one uncritically accepts an empiricist picture of necessary conditions. I am not referring to the now largely defunct thesis that a particular item can be determined to be a K, and hence to meet the necessary conditions of Ks, independently of the particular item's practical, institutional, or historical context, but to the idea that the *necessity* of necessary conditions is always discoverable through empirical methods.⁵ But suppose one wanted to secure the necessity between being a game and having some rules. The *most* a survey of games can show is that having rules is stunningly common among games. Once this is pointed out, the empiricist ought to conclude that having rules is *not* a necessary feature of games, after all; and so, again, necessary conditions seem very few and far between. It is no good for an opponent of this conclusion to insist that a game's having rules is part of the meaning of the word 'game', for this is just what the empiricist must deny. The way out is to take seriously the conceptual link between necessary conditions and intelligibility. To show that having rules is a necessary condition of being a game, for example, one shows that the description of something as a game that has no rules runs into contradiction.⁶ Thus, it is not

⁵ See e.g. Stecker's remarks about 'real essences' ('Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Work of Art?', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 59).

⁶ Here is how: Imagine a person who says, 'I am playing a game without any rules at all'. Suppose we ask, 'How do you play?' Now, what can they say? Nothing. If they say anything like, 'First do this, then do that', then those are the rules, so we have a contradiction. If they say, 'Do whatever you want', either doing whatever you want *is* the rule (so again, we have a contradiction), or it is not. If it is not, it is just another way of saying that *there are no rules*, in which case, it is no *answer* to 'how do you play?' and anyway, a whole battery of

enough to give up an empiricist picture of whatever fills the predicate position in ‘Ks are F’, we must reject the idea that empirical methods are adequate to the task of securing that some condition *is* a necessary condition of being a K.

In rooting out these misunderstandings, we have removed a potent source of bad arguments for anti-essentialism about art. This is helpful as ground clearing, but does not itself point the way to any particular doctrine about art. Before attempting to move forward, however, we need to sort through a different type of muddle about essence—a muddle that arises from the uncritical assumption that the sort of necessary condition that unites being water and being H₂O is the only sort. I turn to this matter now.

II. ESSENCE, AGAIN

It is useful to begin by drawing attention to a passage in George Dickie’s *The Art Circle*, in which he suggests that some obvious truths about the concept of a tiger provide a useful illustration of the anti-essentialist’s thesis about art. He continues:

Conditions such as being striped and being four-legged which may be thought of as necessary can be missing from an individual and that individual can still be a tiger—for example,

descriptions, e.g., ‘playing well’, ‘playing poorly’, ‘cheating’, ‘ceasing to play’, ‘starting to play’, etc. are inapplicable to what is going on. But if both ‘starting to play’ and ‘ceasing to play’ are inapplicable to what is going on, there is no game afoot at all. So again, we have a contradiction.

albino tigers and three-legged tigers . . . being feline is a necessary condition of being a tiger but it is of course not sufficient.⁷

The brevity of these remarks, together with the fact that anti-essentialism about tigers is rather counter-intuitive, tempt one to ignore this bit of Dickie's thought. But let us see if we can take these remarks seriously as an argument for anti-essentialism about tigers.

Taking them seriously requires seeing, first, that Dickie implicitly relies on the facts that having four legs and being striped are not simply statistically common properties of tigers. It is not as though he recommends anti-essentialism about tigers because the conditions of, say, having dirty paws or having a twig stuck to its underbelly, can be missing from an individual yet the individual is still a tiger. Second, the point must be fairly general, although, as he notes, it is not universal. There are *some* truths about tigers such that, if it is not a truth about an individual, the individual is not a tiger—period. (E.g., the individual is a great cat, a feline, a mammal, an organism, a physical object, etc.) The point must be that the necessary conditions of being a tiger, such as they are, are jointly insufficient to distinguish tigers from things that are not tigers, for example, from pumas, leopards, lions and lynxes, at the very least. And this seems correct. For it seems possible to imagine an individual tiger that lacks pretty much *any* given determinate biological trait. For example, one can imagine a tiger that does not hunt, can't digest meat, won't mate, fails to nurse, has mutated DNA, has stopped breathing, does not have a heart, etc. (Doubtless, these last two would

⁷ G. Dickie, *The Art Circle*, (New York: Haven, 1984), pp. 43-44.

be dead, but dead *tigers* nonetheless.) Thus, *if* the sort of necessary condition already on the table is the only sort, then we ought to be anti-essentialists about tigers. And since there is nothing peculiar about tigers in this regard, the argument holds for all kinds of organisms.

A philosopher interested in whether *art* has a nature might suggest that the above considerations are irrelevant to the question at issue. For, if tradition is to be trusted, the topic of art is limited to theorizing about artificial, rather than biological, kinds, and isn't it obvious that 'in inventing the kind we invent the essence of the kind'?⁸ Perhaps, but notice that Dickie's observations can be repeated exactly for, say, 'chair', 'pen', 'house', 'sonnet', 'fugue', 'portrait', 'vase', 'screwball comedy', and so on. Consider chairs. First, there are *some* truths about chairs that warrant the inference from 'This isn't F' to 'This isn't a chair', e.g., chairs are pieces of furniture, are for sitting on, are physical objects, are embedded in an historical and cultural setting, etc. Second, the necessary conditions of being a chair, such as they are, are in fact jointly insufficient to distinguish chairs from other kinds of furniture. Third, there is a large battery of specific truths about chairs that are not merely statistical generalizations and that 'may be thought of as necessary', e.g., that chairs are for *one* person to sit on (unlike sofas), have articulated seats (unlike floor cushions and other lounging devices), have backs (unlike stools), are free standing and moveable (unlike built-in benches), can support the weight of an adult human being (unlike models of chairs), etc. None of these specific truths about chairs warrant the inference from 'This isn't F' to 'This isn't a chair'. For

⁸ R. Stecker, 'Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Work of Art?', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 59.

example, ‘That chair has no back because it fell off yesterday’, is perfectly intelligible—not as a joke or as the garbled utterance of someone who doesn’t understand the language—but as a straightforward, literal description of a fact. Here again, the point does not depend on any peculiarity of *chairs*, but applies to the general class of human roles, activities, and the bits of technology that are among their means and ends.

Thus, the assumption that the sort of necessary condition Dickie is thinking of is the only sort leads to the following dilemma. Either one denies that biological kinds as well as the most well behaved and *apparently* definable invented kinds have natures, in which case one is open to the charge of not taking the concept of *essence* seriously; or one is steadfast in the view that tigers and chairs are clear cases of kinds that have natures and looks in vain for conditions adequate to distinguishing these kinds from all others *and* which warrant the inference definitive of necessary conditions. Either way, one is hardly in a strong position to start arguing about whether or not *art* has a nature.⁹

As the cause of all this trouble is the assumption that the only sort of necessary condition is the ‘Water is H₂O’ variety, we might consider what would be involved in giving it up. The suggestion would

⁹ David Novitz sees the difficulty (‘Disputes About Art’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 2 [1996], p. 155.), and proposes that characteristic, or typical, properties of a K step in where the necessary conditions of being a K leave off. But this hardly explains anything. To say that a property is characteristic or typical of some sort of thing suggests at least that it is statistically common among things of that sort, which need not be true in our sort of case. If a ‘typical’ feature is not a statistically common one and not a necessary one, what is it?

be that the problematic truths about tigers and chairs *are* genuine necessary conditions of being a tiger or a chair, but ones which have a different logical operation. In support of this view, we might adduce its making good sense of some of the features of these descriptions that we have already mentioned. It accommodates the facts that none of these truths are mere statistical generalizations, and that they ‘may be thought of as necessary’, presumably by competent speakers of English who understand the concepts at issue.

Moving beyond considerations already mentioned, notice that the grounds for translating a word in a different language as ‘tiger’ are not only that the word is the subject of a range of true sentences that might also be translated as, e.g. ‘Tigers have four legs’, but that the sentences *operate* in the same way as ours do. And how do ours operate? So far, I have focused on a negative characterization (e.g., they are *not* statistical generalities, and do *not* warrant an inference from ‘not F’ to ‘not a K’). To give a positive characterization, we need to bring in a point that Dickie does not mention: these sentences support objective evaluative judgments regarding an individual K, just considered as a K. The individual tiger that does not have four legs is *thereby* a malformed tiger. The chair that does not have a seat is *thereby* a defective chair. The fact that the lack of the property in the individual implies that the individual is a defective one of its kind is perhaps enough to suggest that some sort of necessity holds between being a chair and having a seat, or between being a tiger and having four legs. But we need not rest content with intuition on this point, any more than we needed to rest content with intuition about the necessary connection between being a game and having rules. For, analogously to games and their rules, one can

show that the hypothesis that the lack of a fourth leg is not a defect of the individual tiger yields a sort of contradiction.¹⁰

The foregoing considerations suggest we abandon the assumption that the ‘Water is H₂O’ variety is the only type of necessary condition, and suppose instead that we work with a logically distinct sort of necessary condition when we traffic with a central and familiar class of artificial and biological kinds. Unlike the sort of necessary condition that warrants the inference from ‘Ks are F’ and ‘This is not F’ to ‘This is not a K’, this other sort of necessary condition warrants the inference from ‘Ks are F’ and ‘This K is not F’ to ‘This K is a defective K’.

One might object that if there really were two kinds of necessary condition afoot in our language and thought, we would have different words to mark the contrast. And while we do have two *words* for talking about what belongs to a thing’s nature—‘necessary’ and ‘essential’ conditions, properties, etc.—we use these words interchangeably. In reply, I would urge that separate terms are unnecessary to mark the contrast precisely *because* it is a logical distinction. We have already noticed that understanding what a tiger *is*, or what water *is*, involves more than the ability to enumerate a list of truths; it also requires grasping the patterns of inference those truths support. But then, understanding what sort of necessary condition is in place is a condition

¹⁰ Making the point for kinds that are defined in terms of a function is a bit easier, so I mention here only the argument about tigers: The key is to suppose that having three legs is a feature of the species, and see what follows about the other parts and operations of the animal. There will be considerable indeterminacy, but insofar as we get a creature described, it is clear that whatever kind of creature it is, it is not tiger kind. The hypothesis therefore yields a contradiction.

of the possibility of understanding what a tiger, or what water, is. In the ordinary business of thinking and talking, therefore, there is no risk of confusion, and no reason to have separate words for each type of condition.

For our purposes, however, it will be useful to have a special name for each type of condition. I will continue to use 'necessary' for the 'Water is H₂O' variety. The sentences that state necessary conditions may take various superficial forms, but they all warrant the inference from 'Ks are F' (the necessary condition) and 'This is not F' to 'This is not a K'. I will use 'essential' for the 'Chairs have seats' variety. The sentences that state essential conditions may also take various superficial forms, but all warrant the inference from 'Ks are F' (the essential condition) and 'This K is not F' to 'This K is a defective K'. Further, if an account of the nature of some sort of thing consists of some essential conditions, I will say it is an *essentially describable* kind.

While the category of essentially describable kinds offers up a great deal to think about, and a great deal that is relevant to the philosophy of art (broadly construed), for the present purpose it is perhaps enough to underscore the following two points: first, the category of essentially describable kinds is a formally distinct category. Second, this is the category of kinds for which there is a clear distinction between objective evaluation of things as good or bad *of their kind*, and evaluation of things as good or bad relative to some particular person's or group's (possibly idiosyncratic), purposes, interests, tastes or what have you. To avoid misunderstanding, I should also add that in what follows I will speak crudely of good and bad Ks, that is, I will ignore the enormously important fine discriminations between excellence,

goodness, mediocrity, utter disastrousness, etc. in the evaluations of individual items. For my purposes, the crude evaluative language is enough, so long as the basic distinction between evaluations of individuals in respect of their nature, and any other possible sort of evaluation is kept in mind.

With these tools in hand, we are in a fair position to make some headway on the special problem of the nature of art.

III. THE GOOD-GUARANTEERING SENSE OF 'ART'

At the beginning of this essay, I said that confusion about essence interferes with focusing clearly on the very concept of art that makes good sense of an anti-essentialist doctrine about it. Essentially described nature is the key, I believe.

A good place to begin is, again, to take some remarks of George Dickie's seriously. There is a passage in *The Art Circle* in which Dickie says, as if it were perfectly obvious, that it makes sense to describe a culture as making works of art just in case it has some practice or other of which the following is true: some of the products of that practice 'have come to have characteristics of some interest (to their creators or others) over and above the interest they [have] as elements in the religious or other kinds of activity in which they [are] embedded.'¹¹ Now, Dickie is obviously touching on a concept of art here, although his employment of the phrase 'characteristics of some interest' is far from

¹¹ Dickie, *The Art Circle*, p. 56.

clear.¹² It is absurd to suppose that Dickie is ignorant of the fact that people's interests can range widely; we can be interested in all sorts of characteristics, of all sorts of objects, for all sorts of reasons. It is equally absurd to suppose that Dickie thinks it obvious that we have any concept of art that covers *all* of this. In light of the work we have done clarifying the topic of a thing's nature, however, it is easy to diagnose of Dickie's unhappy choice of words: he needs, but does not have, the category of essentially described nature. To see this, notice that the contrast class is the class of what has certain 'characteristics of interest' *as elements embedded* in some sort of activity. For example, an umbrella, as such, is an object embedded in the activity of keeping dry while out and about in the rain; the good umbrella has the characteristics of interest to someone engaged in that activity, the bad umbrella lacks those characteristics. Thus, we can avoid the difficulties of appealing to the whole class of characteristics of some interest to somebody or other by speaking plainly about things as good and bad of their kind. So understood, Dickie's claim is that a culture can be said to make works of art, in *some* sense of the phrase, just in case they have some practices—of making or doing some kinds of things—of which the following is true: Some of the instances of those kinds, i.e. some particular products and performances, are *good over and above being good of their kind*.¹³

¹² For a pair of unselfconscious examples its employment, see R. Davies, *The Deptford Trilogy* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 497 and p. 514.

¹³ An excavation similar to the one I have just worked on Dickie's remarks might have been worked on the remarks of others. Consider, for example, Arthur Danto's remark that 'works of art, in categorical

I take it to be clear, once one's attention is drawn to it, that we have a concept of art here. Still, we have not isolated *the* concept of art. Obviously, it is not the ordinary concept of an art form. Nor is it the concept that usually interests Dickie, i.e. what he treats under the heading of 'art, in the classificatory sense'. For, the *classificatory* sense of 'art' swallows kinds whole, in the sense that being a sonnet, a vase, or a fugue is each a sufficient condition for being a work of art, in that sense.¹⁴ Nothing of the sort is true of this concept. Furthermore, it would be premature, at best, to suppose even that we have fixed on the only evaluative or honorific sense of 'art'. 'Work of art' may sometimes express the concept of that which is an excellent one of a selected range of kinds, e.g. those of which some instance has been exhibited at any museum that has the word 'art' in its name; or, the phrase may sometimes express the concept of that which has some from a certain range of valuable properties. Both of these might really be what is expressed by some appearances of the phrase 'work of art', and in either sense, there may be no special problem about art's nature. My claim is only that there is a problem about art, in the sense we find at work in

contrast with mere representations, use the means of representation in a way that is not exhaustively specified when one has exhaustively specified what is being represented'. (*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1981], pp. 147-148.) As many others have noted, Danto's use of the term 'representation' is problematic. But see what happens if we replace it with a reference to artificial essentially describable kinds.

¹⁴ Dickie's work on what he calls 'the classificatory' sense of 'art' is notoriously problematic. I go into the relation between Dickie's topic and the concept at issue here, in 'The Classificatory Sense of "Art"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2003), pp. 133-148.

Dickie's thinking. To keep this sense squarely in view, let us call it the good-guaranteeing sense of 'art'.

Now, if my claim is only that anti-essentialism is a plausible doctrine about art, in the good-guaranteeing sense, and if this concept is possibly just one of many concepts currently expressed by our word 'art', then it is fair to wonder why the conclusion should be of interest to anyone, even supposing it is sound. One answer is just that getting it clearly distinguished from other concepts might remove misplaced resistance to the definitions of those other concepts. A better answer, however, is that the good-guaranteeing sense of 'art' is a pretty interesting concept.

A full defense of its interest would take us too far afield, but it may be helpful to notice a few points. First, our initial demarcation of this concept does not appeal to any particular institutions, practices, purposes or values. Thus, it is a plausible candidate for what Stephen Davies has called 'art with a small *a*', that is, our basic concept of art, the one for which it might be true that any human culture makes works of art.¹⁵ Its candidacy as the basic concept of art is further supported by the fact that the ordinary notion of an art form seems to be definable in terms of it. For an art form, in the ordinary sense of the term, might be just an artificial kind, which has made it into the general consciousness as a kind in which people produce works of art, in the good-guaranteeing sense. If this is correct, it ought not to be a shock that a limited historical and cultural relativism holds for the concept of an art form.

¹⁵ Davies, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 202.

Its interest as a candidate basic concept of art aside, the good-guaranteeing sense of ‘art’ raises a certain philosophical puzzle *not* raised by the classificatory sense of ‘art’ or by any of the other (possible) evaluative senses of ‘art’. To see it, notice that on one way of hearing it, the formulation we have been working with – ‘that is a work of art, in the good-guaranteeing sense, which is good (in some way or ways) over and above being good of its kind’ – is actually trivially true of *anything* good of its kind. For it is a trivial truth about anything, under any of its characterizations, that it is good for some purpose or other. A broken chair might be good as a stage prop, a rock might be good for keeping the door open, and, as Judith Jarvis Thomson points out, something which does not seem to be good for anything (e.g. a mote of dust) is good for use as a philosophical example.¹⁶ Davies is observing this fact, I think, when he notes that ‘a tool handle does not become an artwork merely by having a miniscule, but aesthetically pleasing, carving added to it’. His solution does not press the matter far enough, however. He suggests that where we have a genuine work of art, the kind-surpassing goodness ‘must be regarded as essential to its function, so that it cannot be evaluated properly without taking into account the . . . achievement it involves’.¹⁷ I have no objection to the claim that the feature be essential (in my sense) to the work, but how are we to understand the pronoun that appears in the middle of this answer? The feature must be essential to *its* function. Yes, but *qua* – *what*? Not *qua* tool, obviously, for then the presence of the feature would be relevant only to its being a

¹⁶ J. J. Thomson, ‘The Right and The Good’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 94, no. 6 (1997), p. 277.

good tool of some sort. And not *qua* work of art, for then the explanation would be circular. So, *qua* K, where 'K' is some further essentially describable kind. The generality of this construe seems right, in that it leaves the concept appropriately open-ended. But it cannot be the whole story, for if being non-trivially good over and above being good of a thing's kind, in the relevant sense, were nothing other than being an instance of two kinds and a good one of both, good lighters that are also good paper-weights, good houses that are also good status-symbols, good portraits that are also good investments, etc., would all equally be clear cases of works of art, in the good-guaranteeing sense. And of course they are not. They are not of kind-surpassing goodness, in the relevant sense, at all. But what *is* the difference?

Thus, the challenge posed by the good-guaranteeing sense of 'art' can be laid out quite precisely: it is to explain what it *is* for an object to be good over and above being good of its kind if this is neither a trivial truth about it nor merely a matter of its being an instance of two (or more) sorts of thing and a good one of both. Here, then, is one way to understand the traditional question, 'What is art?'

IV. ANTI-ESSENTIALISM ABOUT ART

In the previous section, I used the notion of essentially describable kinds to focus attention on what I called the good-guaranteeing sense of 'art', and urged that this concept is philosophically interesting in its own

¹⁷ Davies, 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 207.

right. Having just suggested that it puts a particular spin on the old question ‘What is art?’, a reminder is in order. I do not attempt a positive answer here. At present I mean only to pay up on my claim that it is about art, in the good-guaranteeing sense, that anti-essentialism is a plausible (purely negative) doctrine.

In one way, the version of anti-essentialism I am about to defend will be perfectly familiar; I will argue that there are necessary conditions of being a work of art, in the preferred sense, but that these are insufficient in principle to distinguish works of art from what are not works of art. The novelty of the present position is to be found, I hope, both in the argument and in the particular battery of conditions, which turn out to be necessary conditions of being a work of art. It might also be helpful to mention that I will not have a great deal to say about the thesis that the kind, work of art – in contrast to any other kind such works might instance – is itself an essentially describable kind; the idea is initially implausible and becomes more so as one works through the arguments concerning necessary conditions. I will, however, make a few brief remarks about it at the end.

Turning now to the argument proper, let us approach the necessary conditions of being a work of art systematically. Starting with the most general class of necessary conditions, we have Dickie’s recent claim that a work of art is necessarily an instance of a kind, which is a member of the category of kinds that determine standards of goodness and defect for their instances.¹⁸ This is just to claim that being an instance of some essentially described kind or other – with no implication that art itself is an essentially described kind – is a necessary

¹⁸ Dickie, *Art and Value* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 106-107.

condition of being a work of art; its truth follows immediately from the fact that the concept of art we are talking about fits an object only if it is a *good one of its kind*. Thus, whatever the (no doubt, largely formal) truths about the whole category of essentially describable kinds are, these will be truths about works of art. Of course, these same abstract truths hold of what is *bad* of its kind as well, e.g., to shorted-out blenders, leaky pens, non-rhyming sonnets, structurally unsound houses, stunted tree frogs and three-legged tigers.

Moving down a step in generality, suppose we grant that works of art are necessarily instances of kinds belonging to the more restricted category of *artificial* essentially describable kinds.¹⁹ Allowing the restriction brings in a wealth of additional necessary conditions of being a work of art (e.g., those concerning the nature of an institution or a practice as such, of the role of intention, of historical progression, etc.). Even so, all of this together still falls far short of constituting an answer to the particular spin we've given to the question 'What is art?'. The theory of artificial nature provides the necessary conditions of things good or *bad* of their artificial kinds equally. While the theory of artificial nature may be indispensable to a defensible analysis of our quarry, it is obvious that at best it is only part of the account.

The fact that works of art belong to the even more restricted category of that which is *good* of its artificial kind provides a third batch of necessary conditions of being a work of art. Interestingly enough, it is

¹⁹ It is not clear how to demonstrate the necessity between being of kind surpassing excellence and being an artifact. I suspect that a proper analysis of the distinction between artificial and biological nature will provide some of the needed premises. I go into artificial nature a little bit further in 'The Classificatory Sense of "Art"', section IV.

here that we meet many of the traditionally favorite *defining* characteristics of art. Monroe Beardsley's suggestion that a work of art is what, when properly understood, affords the experience that its various parts and operations are working out fittingly belongs to this class.²⁰ Significant form, if properly disambiguated, belongs here, as do the usual examples of the more generic aesthetic properties, e.g. unity, coherence, beauty. That all of these give genuine necessary conditions of being a work of art, in the good guaranteeing sense, should be clear from the fact that they are all necessary conditions of what is good, or excellent, of its kind. A philosopher might resist the inclusion of beauty on this list, but the point about beauty becomes clear once we recall that in *one* ordinary sense (the sense in which there is no question about objective criteria for a judgment of beauty), beauty tracks the presence in the individual of the essential features of its kind, while deformity tracks their absence. Think of describing the anemic, mangy, stunted tiger as a beautiful tiger. It might be objected that these claims are claims about the nature of a work of art, and strong ones at that, and so it is absurd for an anti-essentialist to accept them. This is a mistake; no doubt it is encouraged by forgetting that the standards according to which the object is unified, has significant form, is beautiful, etc., are determined by the natures of the kinds of thing the object anyway is, not by the concept of a work of art. What the anti-essentialist must reject, and is right to reject, is that the necessary conditions found in this class are in any sense sufficient for being a work of art. These are all necessary

²⁰ See 'Aesthetic Experience' and 'Redefining Art', in M. Wreen and D. Callen (eds.), *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1982), chapters 16 and 17.

conditions of being a work of art precisely because they are all necessary conditions of the rather larger category of that which is excellent of its (artificial) kind. They are properties equally of the efficient, reliable, convenient and safe blender, the accurate portrait, the awe-inspiring cathedral, and the mind-bending psychological thriller, none of which are works of art, in the relevant sense.²¹

The above considerations show that the category of that which is good of its artificial kind is a fairly well defined category. Essentialism might well be true of this category. But as not everything that is good of its artificial kind falls under the special concept of art that we have in view, the question is whether there are *further* necessary conditions of being a work of art. This is the crux of the matter for the anti-essentialist, so let us pause here to bring to mind what a further necessary condition would be: it would provide something which can fill the place of a predicate letter in a sentence in which ‘works of art, in the good guaranteeing sense’ is the subject. The sentence would have to warrant the familiar inference: given any object that does not meet the condition, whatever else is true about it, it is not of kind-surpassing excellence. Moreover, to count as taking us *further* along in the analysis, it can’t be circular; this rules out any direct appeal to *kind-surpassing* purposes or values or merits. This last is an obvious form of circularity, but there are more subtle varieties as well. It does not help our present problem to say, for example, that a work of art is that which merits a

²¹ Perhaps an excellent blender does not have significant form, in Clive Bell’s sense of the phrase. But then again, it is far from clear that having significant form, in Bell’s sense, is a necessary condition of being non-trivially good over and above being good of a thing’s kind. See C. Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).

person's serious attention, regardless of the person's antecedent interests, tastes, or abilities.²² For the two questions, 'What is it to be good over and above being good of its kind, in the relevant sense?' and, 'What is it for an artifact to merit a person's serious attention, regardless of that person's antecedent interests, etc.?' are surely one and the same.

The only possibility remaining seems to be some version of a logically complex necessary condition, or, perhaps, a condition that mentions a certain *type* of property. There is no need to go into the details of such theories, but it will be of some use to have a couple of clear examples. On a disjunctive account, such as Robert Stecker's historical-functionalism, the further necessary condition is a disjunction of functions (the disjuncts might change over time and from culture to culture), such that anything which fulfills some of them excellently is a work of art.²³ The only relevant difference between an account like Stecker's and a kind-of-property account is that, on the kind-of-property

²² I find this to be the semi-implicit conclusion of Cohen's argument in 'The Very Idea of Art', *National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts Journal*, vol. 9 (1988), pp. 7-14.

²³ Stecker is explicit on this point, see *Artworks*, p.52. Gaut's position ('Art' as a Cluster Concept', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 26-27) is somewhat different. He holds that there are certain features which, though not individually necessary conditions, necessarily 'counts towards' the judgment that something is a work of art, and are jointly sufficient (with some indeterminacy regarding how few are sufficient). Most of the features Gaut mentions are in fact necessary conditions of what is good of its artificial kind. The argument in the text is relevant to the others; it shows, if correct, that even the weaker condition of 'counting towards' the judgment that something is a work of art is too strong.

account, the art-making properties cannot be listed out, even relative to a certain time and place.²⁴

Now, the problem with any theory of either of these types, as a theory of the good-guaranteeing sense of ‘art’, is that it must ignore the fact that essentially described nature is a *formal* category. We all understand, for example, that killing quickly is a merit of rat poison but would be a defect of some baby food, and thus, that killing quickly is neither a merit nor a defect, as such. What we forget, perhaps, is that the point is general. For *any* determinate property, or function, it is possible to find some essentially described kind or other such that, if one of *that* kind fulfills the function excellently, or has the property, then this itself constitutes a *defect*. Stecker is struck, for example, by the idea of a chair that embodies the promise of a new and better way of life for a certain class of people – surely *this* is a work of art.²⁵ I agree, and add that it doesn’t matter whether the promise reflects the actual social conditions or not; but suppose instead we imagine a documentary film on the social conditions of that class of people embodying the promise, and suppose the conditions are terrible and the promise is a lie? In the documentary, embodying the promise is a defect, and so the film is *not* a work of art, in the good-guaranteeing sense. Or take a different example: investigating difficult ethical questions unblinkingly is essential to essays in applied ethics, hence a condition of their

²⁴ Again, I take Eaton’s position (‘A Sustainable Definition of “Art”’, in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*) to be a clear example.

²⁵ See ‘The End of an Institutional Definition of Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 26 (1986), p. 130. I don’t know whether Stecker was thinking of Charles and Ray Eames’ heat-molded plywood chairs, produced by Herman Miller since 1946, but they are fitting examples.

adequacy as essays. To investigate a difficult ethical problem in a thriller, however, might be an excellence that makes the thriller a work of art. Nonetheless, it would be a grave defect in a bedtime story for young children, and of course the more excellently the bedtime story investigates the issue, the worse it is *qua* child's bedtime story.

The argument above supposes that there is no such thing as a property or function which cannot count as a defect of some sort of thing. But suppose that this is not true, i.e. that there is a class of properties for which there is no K such that if a K had one of these properties, this would count as a defect of it *qua* K. I doubt there are any members of this class that are not properties of *everything* good of its kind (and hence already necessary conditions of being a work of art). But even if this is wrong, it will still always be possible to produce an essentially described kind for which having the property is a condition of being (merely) a good one of its kind, and is therefore not sufficient to make it a work of art. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the less generic aesthetic properties, such as grace, tension, balance, etc., belong here. Still, being graceful in movement and elegant of line belongs to being (merely) a good ballet dancer or society hostess, while such grace and elegance might effect the transition from being (merely) a good piano performance or tennis match to being a work of art.

At this point, one might object that I cannot consistently claim that there are *no* sufficient conditions of being a work of art, in the relevant sense, since I have throughout allowed that e.g. being a good chair that embodies the promise of a better way of life, is a sufficient condition. This is true. However, an account of what it is to be a work of art that disjoins *these* types of descriptions has about as much ability

to answer our ‘What is art?’ question as does answering the philosophical question ‘What is life?’ with, ‘To be alive is to be a tiger or a llama or a turnip or a snail or a paramecium, or, or, or’. Let us not lose sight of the puzzle raised by the good-guaranteeing sense of ‘art’. It is not a problem about being able to, say, go into a warehouse and carry out all and only the works of art. It is a puzzle about how to make sense of a type of evaluative judgment.

If the foregoing arguments are sound, we must abandon the idea that having properties of some type, or of fulfilling some functions excellently, are sufficient conditions being a work of art; and with it must go the promise of a further necessary condition of being a work of art that disjoins these. This whole idea is inconsistent with the condition that marks the good-guaranteeing sense of ‘art’ out as a distinct concept, problematic though it is.

The anti-essentialist would therefore seem to be in good shape regarding the possibility of analyzing our quarry through the production of necessary conditions. Necessary conditions might take us up to the concept of that which is an excellent one of its (artificial) kind. They cannot, it appears, take us further. In particular, it is not through the production of necessary conditions that we can expect an account of the difference between works of art and that which is good over and above being good of its kind in the trivial sense in which this is true of any thing good of any kind, or even the more limited sense in which good multipurpose objects are good over and above being good of (each of) their kinds.

It remains to say something about the thesis that art, itself, is an essentially described kind. I remarked earlier that the suggestion is

initially implausible, and I hope that it now seems obviously muddled. It is true that essential conditions of being this or that kind of thing play a central role in the judgment that something is a work of art, but as we have seen repeatedly, it is never *work of art* that operates in the position of our schematic 'K'. Thus, there is no significant distinction to draw between what is essential and inessential to an object *qua* work of art, and so no straightforward work to be done by the descriptions 'good/bad work of art', where the good-guaranteeing sense is supposed to be in place.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that clarity about essence provides the tools both to isolate a distinct concept of art and to see why anti-essentialism is a plausible, though incomplete, doctrine about it. While this concept is surely not the only concept currently expressed by our word 'art', it is an interesting, and might be an important, one. One of the challenges it poses to conceptual analysis is to explain *what it is* to be better than being good of a thing's kind, where this extra-goodness is neither a trivial fact nor simply a matter of being a good instance of two different kinds of thing. While anti-essentialism seems to be right about what types of analysis will not work for it, this result only deepens the question of what its proper analysis is.²⁶

²⁶ Many thanks are due to Ted Cohen, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, George Dickie, Peter Lamarque, Martha Nussbaum, Miles Rind, Gaby Sakamoto, Joel Snyder, Michael Thompson, Candace Vogler, and Stephen Wessley.