

# The Legacy of Joseph Margolis

## This is not a farewell

*Andrea L. Baldini*, Alliance University\*

*Peter Cheyne*, Shimane University\*\*

*Haewan Lee*, Seoul National University\*\*\*

*Feng Peng*, Peking University\*\*\*\*

The death of Joseph Margolis inspired this special issue. Joe, as he was fondly known, was a towering figure whose work influenced several fields of philosophy for nearly seven decades, beginning in the 1950s. Though he is perhaps best known for his work in aesthetics, which we honour here, he contributed to nearly every discipline and subfield of philosophy, from metaphysics to philosophy of language, and from philosophy of medicine to feminist philosophy.

He was perhaps the best modern embodiment of the Socratic ideal: a philosophical trickster, if you will, capable of turning the philosophical tables upside down with deft moves that left the majority of his interlocutors perplexed, if not speechless at times. His fiery debates with the most prominent thinkers of his generation and beyond have become legendary, lending mythic quality to his life. Among those who have fought Margolis in the philosophical arena are Arthur Danto, Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, and John Searle.

Margolis was a truly original thinker who had no sworn allegiance to any school or tradition. He was initially trained in the philosophy of Dewey and the early pragmatists. However, that was an ageing approach that was quickly losing ground to analytic philosophy. After completing his PhD at Columbia in 1953, Margolis had to retrain himself in what would become the dominant approach in Anglo-American

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\* Andrea L. Baldini – Chandapura - Anekal Main Road, Anekal, Bengaluru - 562 106.

Email: [andrea.baldini@fulbrightmail.org](mailto:andrea.baldini@fulbrightmail.org)

\*\* Peter Cheyne – 791-9 Kuyacho, Matsue City, Shimane, 690-0859, Japan.

Email: [peter.cheyne@gmail.com](mailto:peter.cheyne@gmail.com)

\*\*\* Haewan Lee – Department of Aesthetics, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul 08826, Korea. Email: [haewan@snu.ac.kr](mailto:haewan@snu.ac.kr)

\*\*\*\* Peng Feng – School of Arts, Peking University, 5 Yiheyuan Rd., Haidian Dist., Beijing 100871, China. Email: [pengf@pku.edu.cn](mailto:pengf@pku.edu.cn)



contexts. He was never a faithful disciple, though, and he began flirting with continental thinkers early on, who shared with him a deeper sense of historicity, which captured in terms of the Heraclitan flux would become a central theme in his philosophy. In the last few decades of his life, he found a more suitable home in a return to pragmatism, which he helped to rescue from philosophical obscurity.

Perhaps Margolis' lack of a faithful philosophical allegiance, likely combined with his polemical vigour and a lack of proclivity in pushing his students to follow his philosophical agenda, has made him an outsider despite his high regard in all circles. Surprisingly, his work is frequently overlooked in recent developments of philosophical debates that he helped to create. His writings are rarely found in anthologies or readers nowadays, and his arguments are frequently set aside or ignored.

The way we commemorate Margolis' legacy here aims to correct for these unfortunate circumstances. Though we are focusing on a narrow topic in philosophy of art, that of definition, we hope that this will snowball, reviving interest in his work as a whole. We are certain that Margolis' lessons contain much to be learned, and the philosophical landscape that ignores him is much drier. His radical ideas are frequently effective antidotes to the dogmatism that generally plagues academic philosophy.

The question of demarcation has been a pivotal problem in philosophical discussions about the arts, and it had the lion's share in analytic aesthetics for decades – arguably even today. Morris Weitz' "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" (Weitz, 1956) is still listed as the most popular article published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and it still regarded as the starting point of analytic theorizing on matters of definition – if not of analytic aesthetics *tout court*.

Margolis was one of Weitz' early critics, proposing counter-arguments and alternatives to Weitz's well-known scepticism about art demarcation. Margolis' position has had a significant impact on the debate – but his contribution is nowadays often overlooked. Consider Thomas Adajian's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on the definition of art, which is arguably the most comprehensive and well-written retrospective analysis of the entire debate. Of course, the entry mentions Weitz' famous claim that art is indefinable in the sense that it is constantly changing. Following that, it is claimed that "change does not, in general, rule out the preservation of identity over time, that decisions about concept-expansion may be principled rather than capricious, and that nothing bars a definition of art from incorporating a novelty requirement" (Adajian 2018). Although no author is mentioned, readers familiar with Margolis' 1958 article "Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art," originally published in *Philosophical Studies* and translated here, will recognise that those points echo Margolis' rebuttal of Weitz's position. More gen-

erally, Margolis' contribution is never mentioned in Adajian's entry, not even in the references.

Margolis returns to the issue of art's demarcation repeatedly in his later works. And, while his position naturally evolved over the decades, as he candidly admitted in conversations over the years, his ideas never changed fundamentally. Margolis (2010), for instance, rehearses some of the arguments and objections that can be found in the 1958 paper. In this regard, we have decided to make that early article the starting point for the special issue. Though some may find it problematic to focus on such an early contribution, it has the advantage of being a good entry point into Margolis' philosophy because it does not require familiarity with nearly 70 years of his writing, as much of his later work does. At the same time, the ideas expressed in that paper remain pertinent.

The special issue sparked more interest than we had anticipated. As a result, we received a large number of high-quality papers, many of which came from scholars who knew Margolis personally. It seemed a shame to lose some of those contributions due to space constraints, which unfortunately every journal must deal with. The special issue was then divided into two parts. This is the first of a pair. The second will appear in one of the issues of *EJAP* Volume 3 soon. We are confident that our decision will be supported by our readers and the philosophical community as a whole.

As previously stated, we decided to focus on Margolis' 1958 article "Mr. Weitz and the Definition of Art" in order to give the issue a focus, avoiding both the risk of hagiographic or impossibly heterogeneous papers. It is translated into Chinese and Japanese here. The Korean version will be released in the second part of the special issue. We are extremely grateful to Wayne Davis, the current editor of *Philosophical Studies*, who campaigned tirelessly on our behalf so that Springer would waive the hefty fee normally required to obtain copyright over the original paper. Many thanks also to our translators, Naoaki Kitamura and Kazuko Oguro (Japanese), Jiachen Liu (Chinese), and our co-editor, Haewan Lee (Korean).

The essays included here clearly demonstrate the philosophical mileage of Margolis' ideas. Roberta Dreon's essay sketches a historical evolution of Margolis' views on demarcation issues, emphasising the increasing importance that historicity and contingency play in his later views. Tom Rockmore draws on Margolis' critical engagement with Parmenides to suggest a sense that, echoing the Eleatic poet-philosopher, allows us to recover an idea of art as deeply true. Julie Van Camp's critical note addresses a pressing issue in demarcation, which has resurfaced with Dom Lopes' work, namely the relationship between a general definition of art and the definition of specific art forms. Aili Whalen delves into the disagreement between Margolis and Weitz, claiming that their differences over how

to define art stem from deeper contrasts in their metaphysical worldviews. Finally, James Young discusses persuasive approaches to define art using Margolis' essay and its engagement with real and essentialist definitions.

## References

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