

# What, After All, is Margolis' Problem with Weitz' Definition of Art?

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**ABSTRACT** | This article analyzes Joseph Margolis' criticism of Morris Weitz' definition of art with an eye to sorting out where, precisely, their differences lie. In particular, it focuses on their differing ideas of what an "open" and "closed" definition of art amounts to and what sort of entity art is. It concludes with the suggestion that differences in metaphysical worldview, rather than differences in how they view what kinds of entities should count as art, account for the discrepancy in their views.

**KEYWORDS** | Margolis; Weitz; Art; Definition; Wittgenstein

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## 1 Weitz' View

In 1950, Morris Weitz provided an initial definition of art in his book, *The Philosophy of the Arts* (Weitz 1950). There he defined “art” as “an organic complex or integration of expressive elements embodied in a sensuous medium” (51). This was Weitz’ initial attempt to define art according to necessary and sufficient properties. The necessary and sufficient criteria were 1) organic, 2) expressive, 3) embodied, and 4) in a sensuous medium (this is an empirical criterion – it must be experienceable by a perceiver).

A mere half a decade later, however, in a seminal article entitled “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” that was published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Weitz (1956) eschewed the project of defining art according to necessary and sufficient properties altogether. He criticizes the project of doing so this way:

Each of the great theories of art—Formalism, Voluntarism, Emotionalism, Intellectualism, Intuitionism, Organicism—converges on the attempt to state the defining properties of art. Each claims that it is the true theory because it has formulated correctly into a real definition the nature of art; and that the others are false because they have left out some necessary or sufficient property. (27)

What these great theories were trying to get at, Weitz explains in a later article, is the idea

that concepts are universals, the view held in one way or another by philosophers from Plato to Russell and Moore. This doctrine comprises both an ontological thesis that concepts are either simple or complex, where the latter consist of necessary and sufficient — definitive — properties; and a corollary linguistic thesis that the words that name these complex concepts can be correctly applied to the world only if these words are governed by necessary and sufficient — definitive — criteria. (Weitz 1972, 86)

Weitz then went on to say that the attempt by aesthetic theory to find a real definition for art was fruitless because to find jointly necessary and sufficient properties for art was impossible. “Art, as the logic of the concept shows, has no set of necessary and sufficient properties, hence a theory of it is logically impossible and not merely factually difficult” (1956, 28). A few pages later he reiterates this view again, saying that aesthetic theory tries in vain “to conceive the concept of art as closed when its very use reveals and demands its openness” (30).

Weitz then explains what he means by an “open” concept:

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 stipulating the ranges of their uses. (31)

Art, according to Weitz, is an empirically-descriptive and normative concept so this means that it can only have an open definition (one where necessary and sufficient conditions cannot be stated).

## **2 Margolis' Critique**

Shortly after Weitz published "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" Joseph Margolis issued an article that roundly rejected Weitz' theory; indeed, 10 out of the 11 points Margolis (1958) made are critical or corrective and one lonely point (point two) is in agreement. I won't canvass every critique that Margolis makes but will focus on the ones that pertain to the question of open definition. I shall start with the agreement. There Margolis says:

I agree with Weitz's view of the "open character" of "art"; Weitz does show persuasively that an old-fashioned definition of the novel may exclude, contrary to our wishes, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and that we therefore decide to adjust the definition to incorporate these. (89)

Based on this alone, one might think that Weitz and Margolis might have views of art that are simpatico. Both agree that new examples of things we think are certainly art show up repeatedly and continuously that make us have to refine and rethink earlier definitions. This is why both champion open definitions of art; they agree that closed definitions of art that attempt to fix artworks once and for all by unchanging necessary and sufficient conditions don't make a lot of sense for the practice of art, something that changes and evolves over time.

In addition, both were influenced by the later Ludwig Wittgenstein's recommendations that philosophy make recourse to ordinary language in how it describes the world.<sup>1</sup>

So wherein lies the rub? The crux of the difference in their views lies in how they construe the meaning of "open" when it comes to open definitions of art. Margolis believes that art is inseparable from its nature as a cultural artifact. He says that this provides at least one major limiting condition on any definition of art – a necessary but not sufficient condition if you will – that artworks are those that emerge from a human cultural practice (they are artifactual) (93). Since he believes that Weitz says that there *can be no* necessary or sufficient conditions for empirical and normative concepts like art, this would seem to suggest that Weitz wouldn't find artifactuality to be a necessary condition for art.

At this juncture, let us compare Margolis' definition of art (for he has one) which I have described before this way:

A work of art, like a self, is [a type of expressive utterance that is] typically embodied in some material entity or event, which is not reducible to the physical but that is accessible via our concepts, discernible and real in some communicative form that is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation by the appreciators of that artwork. It is that material form that may be classified and individuated as a work of art for purposes of numerical (which is determinate) rather than for metaphysical (which for Margolis can never be determinate as to "nature") identity. (Bresnahan 2014a)

As we can see from the above, Margolis' definition of art has more than artifactuality as a necessary condition – it would seem that Margolis would also count among the necessary conditions its interpretability and its embodied nature – perhaps components of what he means by "artifact" – but it is clear that this sort of definition does not pretend to be sufficient in defining art for all time. This is true because this definition applies to all of what Margolis calls lingual but not linguistic (due to lack of a formal grammar) expressive utterances, such as making love and baking bread (Margolis 1999, 2010b). For Margolis fine art is only separable (as Dewey would have it perhaps) by its particular history of practices and objects

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this point of agreement, Margolis believes that Weitz misunderstands and misinterprets Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances and misapplies it to art (Margolis 1958, at 8 through 11; also Margolis 2010, 218–219; Weitz 1972, 99–100). I won't be discussing that disagreement in this article, leaving it to others to mull over that interpretive point. I also don't think the debate hangs on Weitz' decision to merely say "Wittgenstein got it right" but is instead trying to make an analogy to Wittgenstein's concept of games to support his own claim.

that have previously been identified as art and it is in this aspect that institutional features would come in.

If Weitz did, indeed, believe that art has no necessary conditions at all (not even artifactuality) the conclusion would be extreme and strange indeed. Where could art come from if not from human nature and culture? Are they Platonic eternal structures of the universe? This, it would seem, is the root of Margolis' suspicion that Weitz believes that art could be something apart from human making, and if that is true, then they should be discoverable and subject to closed definitions (like those concepts in math and logic that he describes). One can now see why Margolis believes that Weitz has gotten himself into self-contradictory hot water. Margolis thus concludes the following:

Weitz's entire argument presupposes in a subterranean way that we are, in some sense, able to grasp the eternal forms of things. We are to recognize that Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, for example, is a novel just as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and hence are to reject, as false, definitions of the novel which fail to include *Finnegans Wake*. (91)

Compounding this disagreement, Margolis says that rather than art being a normative mystery that can and does change inexplicably and in a way that evades any attempt at definition, that the nature of change and evolution of art is instead in human nature, culture, and interpretive practices regarding what we wish to consider art. What's more, he ties all other human-created concepts to the same anchor. In point five, Margolis says, "It is our practical dissatisfaction with any empirical definition of this sort that urges us to revise it, to make a 'decision' (as Weitz would put it)." (91) As Cassius observed to Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "the fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves."

To complicate matters further, Margolis thinks that what we mean even by "necessary and sufficient" is open, since concept-making in language (as well as art) is also a culturally emergent practice that changes as culture changes over time (see additional references at the end of this article, particularly 1995a, 2001; see also Pryba 2021 for more on the development of Margolis' pragmatism). As Margolis points out, if Weitz maintains that there can be no necessary and sufficient conditions for definitions of art then this means that Weitz believes, in error and paradoxically, that necessary and sufficient conditions can close a concept in a way that identifies an essentialist sort of metaphysical truth in other arenas. In his point six, for example, Margolis says that Weitz is wrong that there is never a problem with closed definitions in mathematics and logic as well.

Margolis' point here is that in math and logic too we can "decide" to change the definitions of certain concepts for practical reasons. He takes pains to point

out, however, that this doesn't mean we must always do this whenever we have a change in mathematical understanding.<sup>(91)</sup> This means that Margolis means something different by "closed" definitions than Weitz does as well – he means something like stable over time – not permanent, not fixed, not immutable. Here, too, we see a hallmark of Margolis' pragmatism (in growth, evolution, change, fallibilism, etc.).

The crux of Margolis' criticism against Weitz can thus be reframed as a pragmatist one, seen in context of reflections like the one I made above pertaining to the role of aesthetic feeling in connection with identifying truths about the world. What Margolis does is the following: He simultaneously accuses Weitz of having a definition of art that is *too open* (it denies that art has any perpetual limiting conditions) while also accusing Weitz of essentialism when he attributes appropriate limiting conditions to concepts in arenas like logic and math.<sup>2</sup> It is this that Margolis finds internally contradictory. I suggest, instead, that the dichotomy Margolis is actually rejecting is the idea that some things (cultural, normative kinds) eschew closed definitions whereas other entities (abstract ideas such as those found in logic and math, say) have essences that can be fixed and closed via some procedure of verification other than how we "decide" what is true of art (Margolis 1958, 90–91). If qualitative feelings, if dispositions and predilections, inform our sense of "apt" or "fitting" at the very least (if not "true" in an essentialist way) then art is no different from any other concept in incorporating this kind of normativity into itself. This is what the world is, as constructed and real, according to pragmatists like Margolis.

After pointing out that C.L. Stevenson has a preferable view of open concepts when it comes to literature (something Weitz also hails positively in his 1972 piece on open concepts), Margolis ends his critique with the exhortation that Weitz "simply try again" (Margolis 1958, 95). Margolis then revives his criticism of Weitz theory of art in his 2010 piece "The Importance of Being Earnest about the Definition and Metaphysics of Art", bringing Monroe Beardsley, Arthur Danto, Clement Greenberg, and George Dickie under the umbrella of those he thinks make errors in understanding art for various reasons that can all be boiled down to a failure to recognize the priority of the human self in making both art and the world in which we live. Thus Margolis' criticism, once again, is steeped in the Peircean sort of constructive realism that the positivists have critiqued as inaccurate due to the error of emotivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Here I can't help but note here (as I did in Bresnahan 2014b) that an irony here is that in claiming that art must resist all definitions of the "necessary-and-sufficient-condition" sort, Weitz has provided at least one necessary condition for any such definition: that they must, in all cases, be open.

### 3 Did Weitz Ever Respond to Margolis?

I am not aware of any explicit rejoinder to Margolis' 1958 article by Weitz. Weitz could have chosen to respond to it, for example, in the very journal in which it appears but it seems he chose not to; perhaps he didn't want to issue a response that the JAAC rejected. As a matter of professional practice in philosophy I will reflect here that a failure to respond in this way can mean a number of different things: 1) That the criticism is so stinging, so dead-on, and so true, that the criticized philosopher is simply left speechless; 2) That the criticism is so trivial, so *ad hominem* or so wrong-headed overall that it does not merit a response. I will leave it to the reader to try to imagine which attitude Weitz had here, although of course there may be other possibilities as well.

In the early 70s, however, Weitz wrote a piece that may, if looked at carefully (since he nowhere mentions Margolis in this writing), clarify what he meant by an "open" definition in the essay to which Margolis gave such a withering reply. Here he says that a concept with necessary but without sufficient conditions is still an "open" one:

The basic difference between an open and a closed concept is the absence or presence of sets of necessary and sufficient criteria. The investigation of the logical grammar of certain concepts may reveal concepts with no necessary, no sufficient, and no disjunctive set of sufficient criteria; *or concepts with a necessary criterion but no necessary and sufficient set of criteria*; or concepts with no definitive set as well as no undebatable necessary criteria. *All of these concepts may be said to be open in the sense of having no definitive set of criteria.* (Weitz 1972, 95, italics mine for emphasis)

This emendation of his earlier piece suggests that Weitz' new 1956 view *might* allow that art could have a necessary condition (like artifactuality) and still be an open concept, although his neglect of providing an example of any necessary but non-sufficient conditions suggests otherwise.

This rejoinder to Margolis, however, if it is one, nowhere retreats from his earlier statement that logic and mathematics consist of closed concepts, but instead reiterates it. Weitz cites Friedrich Waismann's 1945 article, "Verifiability," for the point that open-texture concepts apply to the realm of empirical knowledge (not that all empirical concepts are open but Weitz points out that Waismann offers no empirical concepts that are not) "in contradistinction to the closed, completely definable character of mathematics and logic" (Weitz 1972, 92; see also Waismann 1945).

#### 4 What To Make of the Difference in Margolis' and Weitz' Metaphysical World Views?

Weitz is not alone in his idea that there are some completely definable concepts in mathematics and logic. One need only think of Rene Descartes' idea that  $2+2=4$  or that a triangle has three sides are "clear and distinct" ideas precisely because they identify abstract structures in a permanent way.

What this boils down to, then, is a fundamental disagreement over what kinds of entities populate the world. The line of thought that began with Plato, was continued by Descartes, and that carries on in some strands of analytic philosophy today is the idea that there are two sorts of entities in the world: 1) "real" things, discoverable things, things that exist that make our language claims about them true or false and our definitions about those things true or false accordingly, and 2) those things that are merely description and value-laden (what Weitz means by "normative" perhaps) that say more about human inclinations and tastes than they do about the world as such.

Weitz acknowledges that this issue comes to the fore in understanding truth in literature, for example, in an article he wrote a decade before the pieces at issue entitled, "Does Art Tell the Truth?" (Weitz 1943). There Weitz says that there is a traditional view that holds the following:

[W]hen I say "The novel is a form of literature," I am making an informative statement which is either true or false and can be verified by the speaker or hearer of the statement. But if I say "The novel is so thrilling," I am not really telling you anything about the novel but only about my feelings toward the novel in the hope of evoking the same attitudes about the novel in you. (Weitz 1943, 339)

Further, he says the following encapsulates the view of the logical positivist:

This distinction between the emotive and symbolic uses of language is basic to the distinction between poetry and prose or between art and science, to generalize the distinction. To understand the emotive use of language and to use it exclusively is the function of literature. Literature should abandon its quest for knowledge and referential truth. It is not necessary to know what things are in order to express our feeling toward them. It is enough that literature can evoke our multifarious attitudes toward things and can express them in a way that produces pleasure in so many of us. (339–340)



This is the dichotomy between the “real” and the “as lived”, the world of structure and quantitative truths as against the world of feeling and qualitative truths, that classical pragmatists such as C.S. Peirce and John Dewey (and, later, Margolis) derided as false. Instead, these pragmatists championed qualitative truths as also real and not imaginary, constructed but not idealist, changing and evolving, but not thereby suspicious as evidence of the real.

In the second half of his 1943 article, however, Weitz shows where and how he departs from the logical positivist on art; he claims that not all claims made in literature are merely emotive and not also symbolic and that this means that some symbolic claims made within literature are true. He says, “The only thing I am saying is that some literary works of art do try to tell the truth, i.e., convey knowledge and that, when they do their aesthetic merit may be enhanced” (342). How they do this, according to Weitz, is in two ways: 1) by first-order claims (such as “X is true”); 2) by second-order claims, which he calls “depth-meanings” – where “X is true” is implied rather than explicitly stated (344).

Weitz offers three examples of what he calls these “second-order” claims, above, in Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son*.<sup>3</sup> First, he says that “[t]he first thing that we notice is that the story is not about an isolated negro, but about all negroes and racial minorities in America. Bigger’s life and tragedy are symbols of certain conditions existing in America ...” (344). Next, he says that the courtroom scene makes the implicit claim “that socialist reconstruction is the only way out of the present inhumanities of our society” (344). And finally, he says that the main character’s final predicament has the second-order meaning “that the only freedom left to modern man is the freedom to destroy, first others about you and finally yourself” (345–346).

Weitz offers these examples as ones that show that implied truth claims add to the novel’s aesthetic merit but in fact, he has actually shown the opposite – that the aesthetic (emotional) valence of the passages he points to are part of our uptake of the propositions he provides as true. Indeed, when discussing the origin of the phrase “depth-meaning” he notes the following:

...a depth-meaning is one which, psychologically, is suggested by and, logically, is a function of the surface meanings of the work of art. It is here that the emotive meanings of art become symbolic and where one is to look for the truth claims of literature. (344)

I’ll say that again for the people in the back – here Weitz concedes that *emotive meanings of art become symbolic*. This at the very least shows that in 1943 at least

<sup>3</sup> Wright, Richard. 1940. *Native Son*. Harper and Bros.

Weitz was a semiotic formalist, similar in stripe in connecting emotion to form to Clive Bell, Roger Fry and (later) like Susanne K. Langer. This is just a half-step away from C.S. Peirce's semeotics (see his *Collected Papers*) and a bit farther from John Dewey, who prized art as experience rather than form, but who held that the mark of art (a necessary condition if you will) is that art provides *an* experience, a unification and heightening of ordinary experience in a qualitative way (see Dewey 1934).

There is a discrepancy, then, between Weitz' earlier views (from 1943 and 1950) and the view that qualitative response (not limited to primary emotions but ideas like feeling attracted to or repulsed by a concept, or aware of its elegance or awkwardness, for example) is part and parcel of our uptake. Weitz does not explicitly deny the Platonic and positivist idea that emotivity is itself suspect and perhaps it is this agreement that he carries into his 1956 article. He does not there hold, for example, as Peirce and Dewey did, that qualitative attitudes are part of the semiotic meaning of concepts.<sup>4</sup> If Weitz had held anything close to *that* view, he would have clarified in 1956 that aesthetic value is part and parcel of what it means to denote claims about the world as true. Instead, he grabbed on to Wittgenstein's new *Philosophical Investigations* as a way to suggest that art, like games, have putative definitions which have to be "open" to contain the set of things that art shows itself to be over time. (Some explanation for what, exactly, art is then and how we know it when we see it does seem to be missing.)

## 5 Final Reflections

So how does this story end? Can there be any sort of *rapprochement* between Weitz and Margolis when it comes to defining art? What I would say to Margolis if he were still alive and sitting across his office desk from me is this: Do you not advocate, as part of your view of how language and concepts work in philosophy, that we posit claims about phenomena as *façons de parler* (ways of speaking) in a *faut de mieux* (for lack of anything better) way in order to focus the discussion on interesting and relevant properties of the entities and phenomena under discussion? (See Margolis 1999, 2010b) If so, why don't your own inclinations about how these conversations take place point *away from* rather than towards a desire to provide at least necessary if not sufficient conditions for art? The quibble about what Wittgenstein meant by "family resemblances" aside, why do you not em-

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<sup>4</sup> I'll say no more on Peirce and Dewey here but invite the reader to consider Peirce's essay, "Evolutionary Love" (1893) and Dewey's "Ethics" (1932) for how qualitative considerations are part and parcel of how we understand the world.

brace more fully Weitz' desire for an "open" concept in art (understood as you do and as Weitz later clarified as something that allows for necessary if not sufficient conditions)? Why do you not praise rather than deride Weitz for at least a bold attempt to help analytic aesthetics unshackle itself from the chains of the definitional projects expressed entirely in necessary and sufficient conditions? Why do you not at least cheer on the idea of allowing empirical evidence from the world of art-making practice to unseat at least some essential claims about art? You profess to be "radical" (if not "unruly") but perhaps you are not radical enough to yourself abandon the analytic quest for a real definition of art (your weakening of what "real" means notwithstanding).

Here I know full well what Margolis would reply, as he did whenever I asked him to extend more charity to a view with which he disagreed: "You're not going to try to change me now, are you?" This suggests, perhaps, that one necessary (if not sufficient) condition of Joseph Margolis' philosophical disposition is a commitment to finding the best answer to a philosophical question not via compromise or concession but via clear-eyed and non-charitable criticism. It's hard to know whether this is a commitment to truth or simply a personal inclination of Margolis'. Perhaps it's a little of both, if, in fact, those two things can be separated.

One might also question both Margolis and Weitz' commitment to the definitional project itself – open, closed, or somewhere in between. Clearly, they both think it matters that we know, somehow, what art *is* in some way – or at least what kind of thing it is – not just that we can get along with some interesting conversations about features we find interesting or salient on a set of works (and practices and performances) and leave it at that. But this is what, perhaps, makes them both philosophers rather than other kinds of art theorists. One bumps up against the priority of metaphysics and ontology above all else, something both of these philosophers chafe against as too rigid and out of touch with the practice of art and yet, in their separate ways, uphold.

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