

The Expanded Cluster Account of Art

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ABSTRACT. I argue here for a modified version of Berys Gaut's Cluster Account that integrates certain concepts of Boyd's theory of kinds that I call the Expanded Cluster Account of art. First, I explicate the relevant aspects of Boyd's theory of natural kinds and argue that his concepts of "disciplinary matrices" and "homeostatic property clusters" (roughly analogous to Gaut's criterial properties for characterizing art, particularized for each individual kind) have relevant roles in a proper cluster account of art, thus explicating and expanding Gaut's account in the process. Second, I defend the thesis that Boyd's concept of "disciplinary matrix," when applied to "art," is fulfilled by George Dickie's notion of "the Artworld." Lastly, I explain how the Expanded Cluster Account of art answers the primary objection to the original Cluster Account of art: Aaron Meskin's "irrelevant criteria" objection.

1. Introduction

The history of philosophical definitions of art is, unfortunately, a history of failures—it is only relatively recently that a strategy has shown promise: Berys Gaut's cluster account. Naturally, Gaut's cluster account of art has not gone unchallenged, most notably by Aaron Meskin (2007). Meskin raises concerns with the logical form of Gaut's account. He argues that, on Gaut's formulation, nearly any property can count as relevant to an object's being considered art. In response to Meskin, I wish to expand and strengthen Gaut's cluster account.

Meskin offers several strategies the cluster account defender may employ to respond to his concerns, but I am going to forgo Meskin's suggestions in favor of an expanded theory that preserves the basic logic of the

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cluster account Meskin rejects. My approach will integrate developments in another area of philosophy, the study of natural kinds. Richard Boyd's homeostatic property cluster theory of kinds shares both structural and logical similarities to Gaut's cluster account of art; Boyd's theory posits, as does Gaut's, that kinds are determined by their associated *cluster of properties*. What is novel about Boyd's account is its appeal to a "disciplinary matrix": a complex web of practices of the social and historical bodies "governing" kinds. Disciplinary matrices are represented in academic disciplines or research organizations involved in investigating one or another kind of natural objects or phenomena. I will argue that Gaut's cluster account of art may usefully incorporate Boyd's concept of the "disciplinary matrix" as a defense against Meskin's criticism.

I shall first explain Boyd's theory and his terms while demonstrating how it may usefully be adapted to an account of art. Second, I will identify a disciplinary matrix relevant to the determination of art kinds by looking at George Dickie's institutional theory of art. And, third, I shall argue that my expanded formulation of Gaut's cluster account of art can adequately answer Meskin's irrelevant criteria objection.

2. Property Clusters and Disciplinary Matrices

Prima facie, Boyd and Gaut may appear to be addressing two different questions. Boyd is hoping to answer questions regarding the metaphysics of natural kinds and the nature of reference for kind terms, with the aim of picking out kinds useful for reliable inductive generalizations, relative to a specific domain (or discipline) of inquiry (1999, p. 147). Gaut explores the way in which the term "art" is used in language in hopes of providing a sensible way of determining the concept's extension, in an attempt to account for the relevant properties of a specific kind—namely the kind "art"—that facilitate reliable inductive generalizations, such as the type of brushstrokes one may expect to find in an Impressionist painting. Boyd's view relies on two major theses: (1) what he calls the *homeostatic property cluster* (HPC) thesis and (2) the *accommodation* thesis. Since the HPC thesis closely approximates the structure of Gaut's Cluster Account of Art, I argue that is both possible and beneficial to integrate the accommodation thesis into an expanded cluster account of art.

Boyd's theory of an HPC kind may be characterized as a contingent, "naturally occurring clustering of properties with the consequence that (1) it lacks precisely defined membership conditions and, sometimes (2) the properties in the defining cluster vary over time and/or space" (2010: 216). Insofar as conditions (1) and (2) apply to a HPC kind on Boyd's formulation, Boyd suggests that there must be an underlying "homeostatic mechanism" that allows for the natural variance of properties between individual kind members and for the drift of properties over time while retaining a stable kind-term categorization (1999: 143-4). And insofar as HPC kinds are regulated by an underlying "homeostatic mechanism," Boyd asserts such kind terms are fitting to the natural "contours" of the world's causal structure, thereby making inductive generalizations about HPC kinds generally reliable (1999: 143-4).

In this respect, Boyd's HPC account shares a close structural and logical affinity with Gaut's Cluster Account of Art. The logical form of Gaut's account can be summarized in three parts, given a set of criterial properties which "count towards" an object's falling under the concept of "art": (1) if an object instantiates all the properties, then the object falls under the concept of "art" since the criteria are jointly sufficient for the kind membership; (2) none of the properties is individually necessary for kind membership; and (3) there are disjunctively necessary properties for kind membership such that if an object falls under the concept of "art" it must have some set of the proposed properties (2000, p. 33). Gaut is not concerned with defending any particular set of criterial properties; indeed, he argues that one of the virtues of the cluster account is that its proponents can, in the face of counterexamples, "respond by modifying the content of the account, rather than its form" (2000: 33). And Gaut believes not only that this is a successful strategy, but also that it can account for changes in the notion ART throughout history (2000: 32).

If one sets aside the terminological differences between Gaut's and Boyd's accounts, several structural similarities emerge, including that: (1) a kind (i.e., Gaut's "art" kind or one of Boyd's HPC kinds) is *not* determined by an eternal and immutable set of properties, but (2) by a general set of properties, which are *only jointly sufficient*, but which (3) have *multiple sufficient subsets*, and (4) this set of determining properties may vary over time and space, while the intension of the kind term remains consis-

tent. Boyd is committed to (1), (2) and (3) in virtue of his beliefs that HPC kinds have natural variances between members at any given time and that there is still a specific (i.e. homeostatic) *cluster* of properties that determine an object's kind membership. Thus, if "having a trunk" is a relevant property of the homeostatic cluster for elephants, even the trunkless kin of elephants would still be considered elephants—the trunkless elephant still instantiates enough (*a sufficient subset*) of the properties of the homeostatic cluster (such as "having elephant parents" and "having gray skin") to qualify as a member of the elephant kind. With respect to (4), Boyd is expressly committed to the idea that the "property cluster is individuated like a historical object or process: certain changes over time (or space) in the property cluster or in the underlying homeostatic mechanisms preserve the identity of the defining cluster" (1999: 144). Condition (4) of Boyd's HPC theory is intended to account for cases of natural microevolutionary changes in a species, for example. Gaut is expressly committed in the conditions of the logical form of the cluster account (as summarized above) to at least (1), (2) and (3). But Gaut is also committed to (4) insofar as he believes that this is one of the primary virtues of the cluster account: that it is malleable enough to respond to developments in the artworld while preserving a stable notion of art (2000: 32-33).

With the structural and logical affinities of Gaut's and Boyd's cluster accounts outlined, let us now approach the second aspect of Boyd's theory of kinds, his *accommodation thesis*:

The basic lesson here is that the epistemic reliability of scientific practices in a disciplinary matrix (when and to the extent they are reliable) depends on many dimensions of accommodation between (on the one hand) conceptual features of practice in that matrix like its theories, concepts, classificatory practices, inferential standards of experimental design, etc., and (on the other hand) the causal powers of the phenomena under study. (Boyd 1999: 217)

This is to say, insofar as one wants to be able to make sustainable, true claims about the members of a given kind (including its nature, causal powers, and properties), there must be a *disciplinary matrix* that determines the kind *by* its use in those very types of judgments. A *disciplinary matrix* is "a

family of inductive and inferential practices united by common conceptual resources, whether or not these correspond to academic or practical disciplines otherwise understood” (1999: 148). A community that uses the kind-concept and -term for theoretical and practical purposes comprises a *disciplinary matrix* for a kind. Academic research (sub-)fields as ecology, organic chemistry, and particle physics are instances of such communities. However, it would be wrong to think that academic research fields outside of the exact sciences fail to create disciplinary matrices. Comparative psychology, for instance, employs kind terms from a common conceptual set that are used in theoretical and inductive practices. In comparative psychology there is a kind term for “lateral inhibition” that allows psychologists to explain and infer certain patterns of behavior and processing.

Moreover, by the accommodation thesis, disciplinary matrices and kind terms are relative to each other. For example, the kind term “water” has very different theoretical and inductive uses in ecology than in chemistry, and thus will emphasize a different set of relevant properties in the total cluster. For ecology, the relevant properties of water are its life-sustaining features and the dynamics of its flow, since it is used in explanations and inferences about environmental niches and adaptability. In chemistry, the relevant properties of water are its chemical structure and composition, since it is used in explanations and inferences about solubility and phase change. Of course, not every kind term will be useful or relevant to every disciplinary matrix—for example, the economic kind term “demand” is irrelevant to particle physics.

Does the kind term “art” relate to a specific disciplinary matrix? Can we say that ART is related to a recognized discipline in such a way as to create or identify a matrix for it that will allow us to treat it like Boyd treats HPC kind terms? After all, ART appears to be much more nebulous than the kinds determined by the exact sciences. Nevertheless, ART *does* meet all the criteria for kindhood as proposed by Boyd above. Artworks share a set of causal powers of interest to a community that uses the concept in theorizing, classification schema, and inferential judgments. For example, one candidate for a causal power of artworks is *to command appreciation*. Why would we for so long have tried to unite artworks under a single definition if they did not have causal powers worthy of our attention? In many ways, the search for these causal powers is the search for a defini-

tion of art—what makes art unique? The ability to command aesthetic appreciation is a causal power that distinguishes unorganized noise from music, a child’s finger-painting from a Rothko. Consider again the kind term “water” and its relation to chemistry. The history of water from the perspective of chemistry has been a history of identifying its causal powers relevant to chemistry itself. “Art” is a term that is useful for making reliable generalizations about a given object. To deem an object a work of art implies that it has the properties of being the product of a human action and being something intended for an audience, for instance. And as the classifications of a kind term become more specific, more generalizable properties become apparent; there are more interesting generalizations we can make about a specific group of artworks, such as “impressionist paintings,” than about the more general concept ART. Third, “art” plays a pivotal role in the theorizing, inferential structures, and classificatory practices of at least a handful of disciplines. “Art” is a kind term by which some disciplines such as aesthetics and art history demarcate their proper objects of study. Kind terms such as “green” or “symmetrical” or “lyrical” will be necessary for disciplines such as art criticism and studio art. As we saw in the case of the kind term “water” above, “art” is a kind term not specific to one discipline; it may occur, but play a decidedly different role, in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. It appears then, that by Boyd’s definition of HPC kinds, “art” is a proper kind term that relates to a variety of disciplinary matrices.

When we integrate Boyd’s accommodation thesis and disciplinary matrices into Gaut’s Cluster Account of Art, some important consequences follow. Most importantly, there are the structural consequences of the theory to consider. In Gaut’s account, there is no mechanism for generating the relevant properties of the cluster. Gaut proposes ten criteria he believes are good candidates, but these are simply criteria gleaned from other definitions of art and his own intuitions—Gaut does not argue for his proposed criteria, but only for the logic of his account. But using an expanded cluster account of art, anyone may argue that she has chosen the correct set of properties of the cluster for ART (relative to a disciplinary matrix) because there is a historical community, creators and keepers of the corresponding disciplinary matrix, that agrees on the relevant set of properties that determine whether an object falls under the concept ART.

While it may seem subtle, the incorporation of a disciplinary matrix into the expanded cluster account makes it significantly different from Gaut's account of art. On Gaut's account, a philosopher may propose a certain set of criteria for the determination of artworks, which she believes to be correct, and she may provide compelling reasons why her criteria are appropriate. This way of determining a set of criterial properties is explanatorily *ahistorical*. The criterial set is proposed from a contemporary perspective and projected on to historical artifacts, like American Indian and ancient pottery. The disciplinary matrix, on the contrary, provides an essentially *historical* manner of determining the criteria, in which the proposed criteria are based on real historical and circumstantial usage. On the expanded cluster account, the set of properties in the cluster for ART is determined by the related communities in which the concept is used, with the community and concept co-evolving over time and space, and, importantly, without changing the intension. That is to say, the ahistorical model looks at the usage of the concept in its current form and then imposes its modern standpoint onto history. On the other hand, a historical approach investigates the usage of the concept as an evolving phenomenon, researching both the concept's usage and corresponding disciplinary and historical circumstances that develop *through* time to arrive at a theory. The historical approach is much more likely to produce good inferences and theories about both the contemporary concept the historical concept ART, rather than clumsily attempting to infer backwards from a modern standpoint. And it is precisely this important shift in epistemological authority that I believe answers Meskin's concerns, as I will argue shortly.

3. *The Artworld*

Having established the logical and structural viability of conceiving of ART as a Boydian HPC kind, there remains the question of identifying its relevant disciplinary matrix. I have already named some academic disciplines whose matrices employ the kind "art," but if we were to *only* consider these disciplines, we would determine a much more idiosyncratic notion of "art" than the folk employ. Indeed, it seems presumptuous to assume that art historians, sociologists, and trained studio artists share the same

concept ART as the folk (or even as each other). If academic fields are too idiosyncratic in their concept ART, might we then turn to a more intellectually diverse institution? I maintain that the disciplinary matrix that corresponds with the common usage of “art” is the “family of inductive and inferential practices united by common conceptual resources” (1999: 148) that emerges from what George Dickie has previously called the “artworld.”

Following Arthur Danto (1964), George Dickie defines the artworld as the totality of artworld systems that are “framework[s] for the presentation of a work of art by an artist to the artworld public” (Dickie 2000: 101); so, for example, art galleries (and their patrons, curators, owners, critics, etc.), theaters (and their patrons, curators, owners, critics, etc.), and museums (and their patrons, curators, owners, critics, etc.). While Dickie and I recognize his definition is circular, he is right in insisting that the “artworld” is a commonsense notion with which Westerners are familiar by a young age. Dickie considers “art gallery entrepreneurs, museum curators, art critics, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others” all examples of players in the modern-day artworld (2000: 102). Dickie’s artworld is a good candidate for the role of that community that supports the disciplinary matrix corresponding to the concept ART. Philosophers of art, art theorists, and other members of the artworld incorporate ART into their inductive, classificatory, and theoretical practices; yet the generality introduced by including museum curators and the artworld public into the definition saves the artworld from being too esoteric a community to determine the common usage of “art.” Furthermore, Dickie recognizes the malleable and historical nature of the artworld *qua* actual institution. Dickie posits that the artworld has “occurred [in] many different times in many different cultures” and suggests it began as very socially primitive and has developed to the social complexity of the modern Western artworld (2000: 102). The practices of Dickie’s artworld meet all of the criteria of the “disciplinary matrix” as defined by Boyd above and, *prima facie*, they do so more comprehensively than any other candidate.

One may object to using Dickie’s artworld as the disciplinary matrix for ART on purely definitional grounds—most of Dickie’s opponents have focused on the aforementioned circularity in his theory, as well as its lack of necessary and sufficient conditions for ART. For our purposes, however,

these common charges against Dickie are not important. My goal here is to pick out the institutions in the real world whose practices constitute the disciplinary matrix for ART. Boyd has already provided an adequate definition of a disciplinary matrix, so the artworld merely acts as content in this particular case. Because the content of disciplinary matrices (e.g., the academic discipline of chemistry) is naturally fuzzy, the artworld needs to be defined only strictly enough for us (1) to recognize it as a possible candidate for “disciplinary matrix” and (2) to pick out the correct institution in the real world. And, indeed, it is hard to deny that Dickie is broadly characterizing an institution with which any acculturated Westerner is familiar.

4. Answering the Irrelevant Criteria

Having argued for a theory of how to determine “art” as a kind and what institutions’ practices determine that kind, we are now ready to consider how the expanded cluster account handles Meskin’s primary objection to Gaut. In his article, “The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered,” Meskin advances what he calls the *problem of irrelevant criteria*. He shows that because Gaut’s account allows there to be sufficient subsets of criteria, but contains the caveat that the criteria are disjunctively necessary once a sufficient subset is instantiated, any other random criterion that the object of inquiry satisfies may be “tacked on”—they can be added to the list as disjunctively necessary without violating the logical form of the account. Thus, criteria such as “having been made on a Thursday” or “being made out of chocolate” could “count towards” an object’s falling under the concept ART (2007: 391-2). But while irrelevant criteria may not violate the logical form of Gaut’s account, “in no plausible sense does being made by a person whose name begins with the letter ‘B’ count as a matter of conceptual necessity toward the instantiation of the concept ART” (Meskin 2007: 392). The problem for Gaut, then, is that, based purely on the logical form of his account, there is no clear way to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant criteria.

Based on his response to earlier critics, it appears Gaut may be willing simply to bite the bullet in the face of Meskin’s criticisms. In response

to Stephen Davies (2004), who argues that the Cluster Account of Art is actually a disjunctive definition, Gaut implies that his account may entail having a substantial list of criteria, and that it may be the case that some of them end up never actually being instantiated (in which case they should eventually be stricken from the set of properties), but this does not directly address Meskin's problem (Gaut 2005: 286). The challenge of Meskin's proposal is that, contrary to Gaut's presupposition in his response to Davies, the seemingly irrelevant properties *are* instantiated at least occasionally, and so it is not clear why they do not "count towards" an object's falling under the concept ART on Gaut's account. Meskin proposes several possible avenues of response, all dealing with modifications of the logical form of the cluster account. I, however, would like to explore a different avenue with my expanded cluster account. I have chosen not to modify the logical form of Gaut's account; instead, I incorporate the epistemic mechanism (disciplinary matrices) that governs the common usage of the concept ART—for that common usage, Gaut, channeling Wittgenstein, says, "Don't think, but look!" (Gaut 2000: 28).

The problem with Gaut's account is that it does not have a proper source of authority for generating a set of criteria. The method for criteria selection would presumably be something similar to *reflective equilibrium*. On Gaut's view, criterial selection will proceed approximately as follows: philosophers and other theorists posit a certain set of criteria, another philosopher raises an objection or counterexample to the first formulation, another philosopher comes along and reformulates the view, and this dialectic continues into the foreseeable future. The problem is that Meskin's critique threatens to undermine *any* set of criteria proposed within the framework of the *reflective equilibrium* methodology. That is to say, given any set of artworks, with any set of proposed criteria, Meskin can construct a counterexample by appeal to any odd property that all the objects instantiate, but which would only ludicrously be deemed something that should "count towards" those objects' falling under the concept ART. This irrelevant criterion could be something as innocuous as "constructed on Earth," which would certainly apply to any example given, but which does not seem like a necessary or relevant property to "counting towards" an object falling under the concept of ART. While this could be considered a failure of the logical form of Gaut's account, I have chosen to ap-

proach Meskin's challenge otherwise, because I understand the problem differently. As I intimated previously, the problem is that Gaut's account designates no authority or methodology for criterial property selection. Meskin is correct in pointing out that, using *reflective equilibrium*, it is not feasible simply to understand the concept ART as it is commonly used; the result will not be a stable and objective set of criteria. And this is precisely why relativizing the use of the concept ART to a particular disciplinary matrix helps us avoid Meskin's critique.

By relativizing the concept ART to a historical institution, *reflective equilibrium* is no longer needed for determining the relevant property cluster. Instead, an empirical historical approach should ground the property cluster for ART. The artworld itself must be examined and surveyed to understand ART. The Expanded Cluster Account designates the corresponding disciplinary matrix as the ultimate ground of the properties relevant to ART. Also, the people of the artworld (as creators and keepers of the practices constituting the disciplinary matrix) provide a basis of authority for the criterial property set; if a criterion does not relate to how ART is *actually* determined by the disciplinary matrix, then it will fail the test of relevance. Thus, Meskin's problem can be avoided by deferring to the actual practices of the Artworld. In fact, since it is relativized to a disciplinary matrix (the Artworld), the Expanded Cluster Account *must* defer to the reality of the Artworld. The primary difference between Gaut's Cluster Account and the Expanded Cluster Account is that the latter holds a stipulation that the set of criteria for ART must "track" the reality of the Artworld. Since Gaut never stipulates an *authority* for determining the plausible criteria for ART, if Meskin attempts to tack-on the property of "being made on a Monday" to a set of criteria that instantiates ART, it does not violate any of Gaut's stipulations (in spite of the properties unanimously acknowledged irrelevance). Tacking-on an irrelevant property to a set of criteria that instantiates ART does, however, violate the stipulation of the Expanded Cluster Account that criteria may count towards an object falling under ART *only if* it tracks the reality of what is understood to be relevant to falling under the concept ART to those in the Artworld. If it were not the case that relativizing ART to a disciplinary matrix requires said stipulation, Boyd could be presented with a similar objection to his theory of kinds. For example, one might say that the property of "being

drunk by someone on a Monday" could be a tacked-on to the properties that count towards a liquid instantiating the concept WATER, but it fails because this property fails to track the realistic interests of WATER's relevant disciplinary matrix. Therefore, while the Expanded Cluster Account does not obviously alter the logical structure of Gaut's account, its inheritance from Boyd and resulting stipulation render the account immune to Meskin's objection.

5. Conclusion

It occurs to me that one may argue that pursuing one of Meskin's recommended avenues of response could yield a modified view with fewer adaptations that adequately responds to Meskin's problem (see Longworth & Scarantino, 2010). In brief, I believe there are many further heuristic and explanatory benefits of my expanded cluster account that are simply not available to mere logical reformulations of Gaut's account. By relativizing "art" to a historical institution, a whole new set of explanations regarding the evolution and developments of art becomes available—the account presented in this paper seems quite capable of dealing with questions regarding the continuity of "art" across time and space, for instance. And if critics agree about the prospects of the expanded cluster account of art, then the additional benefits may suggest ripe topics of further research.

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