

Why *did* Plato hate art?

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A good thought experiment is one of the best legacies a philosopher can leave. Arthur Danto's *Gallery of Indiscernibles* seems to show decisively why the notion that a work of visual art is exhaustively described as a material object is false. One of the great accomplishments of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* was to make that claim look indefensible. But the bulk of the arguments in that book are aimed at developing the positive thesis that artworks are interpreted objects, and that artistic interpretations require art theories. This claim seems broadly correct. However, there seems to be a tension internal to Danto's articulation of the details of the function of an art theory.

Danto says that art is dependent upon theory for its existence. Art theory is 'so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an art world, a world of interpreted things.' (135). But what is the status of art theoretical claims? Are they truth-apt assertions, or are they prescriptions? In what sense are they true, if they are? Danto doesn't explicitly say, but his arguments suggest an answer that creates difficulties for the role he wants theories to play in constituting artworks. The constitutive role played by theory is one of the distinctive features of Danto's project, and so I believe he is forced to hold that art theories at their core should be understood as truth-apt, but not true absolutely. This will compel other revisions in Danto's arguments in *TOC*, but I think this way retains the most important elements of the theory.

What is an art theory? As Danto conceives of it, art theory determines how the 'is' of artistic identification functions. He offers the example of an art critic or theorist he dubs 'the physicalist of pigment' (135). The physicalist looks at a particular painting and says, 'This is black and white paint and nothing more.' The function of that utterance is importantly different from other utterances of the same words, directed at the same painting. One such tokening comes from the philistine, who is perhaps fed up with soup cans and messy beds in the gallery, and is now beyond irritation at all the fuss over a black and white abstract painting. His utterance means that the painting is worthless, uninteresting rubbish. A variation, 'This black paint is black paint', is a tautology, but 'This is black and white paint and nothing more' is tautological only if 'this' refers to something different than 'this' in the mouth of the physicalist of pigment. What distinguishes the physicalist's utterance is that it is made in the context of history of art, and depends on a particular art theoretical framework. What makes the philistine a philistine is that he does not know what is required to make a meaningful statement about a work of art that effects the distinction between artworks and non-art material objects. What makes the physicalist's utterance non-trivial, non-tautological, is that the theoretical and historical context from which it issues allows 'that' to refer to something apart from the actual paint.

The example is a particularly interesting one, because of course the physicalist of pigment adheres to the theory that only the physical attributes of the painting matter. This, however, is a self-consciously exclusionary claim. The physicalist is presumably well aware of other art theories and is taking pains to distinguish himself from them. As Danto puts it, 'he is saying, in effect, that a whole other class of identifications is wrong,

relative to a *theory* of what art is.’ (135) But this suggests that, relative to some other art theory, those other identifications could be true. Here is where the problem arises. Are art theories themselves truth-apt, or not, and if so, in what sense? If we think of a particular interpretation as being true relative to art theory, that seems to allow three possibilities. Art theories are either true or false, in an absolute sense. Or, they are true (when true) but not absolutely so. Rather they are true by convention. This includes but is not exhausted by the possibility that they are stipulated (perhaps pronounced by an appropriately situated member of the artworld), functioning like arbitrary axioms which can be applied to works to generate interpretations. Or finally, they are not truth-apt at all, and we might understand art theoretical assertions to carry an implicit prefix such as ‘It is rewarding to accept that’. It is fairly clear that this last option will not do the work that Danto needs done. He wants to have the means to say that it is true that certain objects are artworks, and others, some perceptually indistinguishable from artworks, are not. Although a prescriptive account that can make these distinctions might be given, I am not optimistic about such a project, and I will set it aside.

Consider the first option. Since theories constitute artworks, and allow us to distinguish them from non-art objects, the idea that theories are absolutely true or false implies that a false theory could wrongly identify something as an artwork. It needn’t—there could be lucky applications of the theory—but it is possible. Absolutely false (I don’t mean *entirely* false) theories would wrongly articulate how the ‘is’ of artistic identification functions. Danto argues that the Imitation Theory does just that. This theory implies that ‘whatever properties the artwork has’—*qua* artwork—‘are simply the

properties of what the artwork shows.’ (153) But one problem with this theory is that it is committed to the following:

For any aesthetic predicate F, $F(\text{work}) \rightarrow F(\text{content})$

And of course this fails to be true for a many, perhaps most, aesthetic predicates. A powerful, or fluid, or profound painting of flowers could not be a painting of powerful, fluid, or profound flowers. So the Imitation Theory is false, and art cannot be strictly identified with or reduced to its content.

Here’s the rub. If theories are work-constitutive and can be absolutely false, then a person operating with a false theory can at best identify artworks by accident. ‘Small wonder that Plato hated art’, says Danto, suggesting that the culprit is the false theory with which Plato and his contemporaries operated. But which art identifications would Plato fail to make? Assuming that the theory Danto ultimately defends is correct, most everything that Plato calls art is art. But the Imitation Theory ‘cannot serve to differentiate artworks from the pertinent class of [non-art] representations which are just like them in the sense of having the same content.’ (151) So Plato, operating with a faulty theory, could not distinguish a work of found art from a non-art object of the same sort, for instance. Can this really be an objection to the Imitation Theory, though? If works are constituted by theories, and become possible only in a particular historical and theoretical atmosphere, as Danto says, why not simply say that that when Plato walks past a painting, fists clenched in disgust, and kicks a rock on the floor, that the question ‘Has Plato kicked an artwork?’ simply cannot arise?

Danto’s example of the Opaque Theory is the opposite reduction of the Imitation Theory: the artwork is only the material it is made from. Paintings made under the

influence of this theory are called ‘hardcore paintings.’ Danto objects that ‘hardcore painting would have to go with hardcore language as well; none of the predicates characteristically used of painting can be used of hardcore painting, but only the predicates that apply to real things.’ (159). Indeed, the language of hardcore criticism would sound much like that of the physicalist of paint. Danto seems to hold that the Opaque Theory is absolutely false, since we are inclined to use aesthetic predicates barred by the theory. There is no doubt that the theory makes for a rather austere, perhaps rather uninteresting, critical discourse, but austerity and poverty are not marks of falsity. There are works meant to block the ascription of aesthetic properties to them, and for such works the discourse demanded by the Opaque Theory seems a suitable one.

The notion that art theories are *absolutely* true or false should be surrendered. With that goes a timeless, absolute distinction between artworks and other things. This is a distinction that Danto does not care for anyway. The idea that, in the right theoretical context, anything could be an artwork is much more in the spirit of his oft-claimed pluralism. The natural counterpart to pluralism is the view that true art theories are true by convention, not absolutely, which opens the door to a plurality of true art theories. This is not an endorsement of the caricatures of the Institutional Theory that Danto rightly resists, and I cannot attempt an explication of the conventional norms that discipline the adoption and rejection of art theories. Surely, though, one mark of an acceptable theory of art is that it makes our interpretive practices richer and more pleasurable. Plato did not hate art because he was in the grip of an absolutely false art theory, but he may have hated it because the theory he had made art boring.

While I believe that the conventional truth of art theories is what Danto needs to defend the claim that works are theory-constituted, this requires a qualification of our understanding of the Gallery of Indiscernibles. According to the Opaque and Imitation Theories, many if not all of the red squares in the Gallery fail to be distinct works. They only become distinct in the context of a theory like Danto's. This is an objection to the other theories only if we presume from the start that they are distinct works, and this presumption is itself art-theoretically laden. In arguing that theories constitute works, Danto may have to concede that his favored art theory is at best conventionally true, but if this is right he's no worse off than anyone else, and still better than most.