

Art and Radical Interpretation

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What is art? This has been a disputed question, and attempts to answer it have come from different perspectives.¹ Some have addressed the question on a conceptual level, others in a more non-conceptual way. In the first category one finds theorists who discuss what art is, in the second artists whose works of art challenge our conception of what art is, the most famous being Andy Warhol.² It would be unreasonable to hold that only one of these categories should influence our conception of what art is. A better suggestion is that contributions from both categories, directly or indirectly, shed light on something that should be examined from different perspectives.³

The issue of the nature of art can also be understood as a semantic issue. Art is what the word 'art' applies to. This means that if one knows what the word 'art' applies to, or alternatively what the concept of art applies to, then one also knows what art is. One way of addressing the issue of the nature of art is therefore to ask what the meaning of 'art' is.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to an answer to this question by applying an influential radical interpretation theory from philosophy of language. The basic idea in this theory is that one can arrive at knowledge of what sentences mean on the basis of knowledge of the conditions that make sentences true. Such explications of truth-conditions of sentences involving 'art' are meaning-explications of 'art', but they should not be understood as traditional definitions, as such definitions have been criticised in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein.⁴ The explications should rather be understood, in a sense to be explained, as elements in an unarticulated conception of art.

It will be argued that these explications are important for several reasons. The most important is that they are plausible. Standard objections to analyses of the concept of art hold that the analyses do not include something that should fall under the concept.⁵ The conception of explication in radical interpretation, on the other hand, is aimed at the meaning of the word 'art' within the whole language that is interpreted. That is why the explications are *meaning*-explications. A second reason why the explications are important is that further theoretical analyses of the concept of art should be consistent with meaning-explications of 'art', as the word is understood within the language we use. It will also be argued that the radical interpretation approach has plausible metaphysical and epistemological implications for the meaning of 'art'.

I will first give an introduction to the philosophical theory of

1 For two recent overviews, see N. Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), and C. Korsmeyer ed, *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

2 R. Smith, 'Conceptual Art', in *Concepts of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

3 A. Danto, *Philosophizing Art* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

4 L. Wittgenstein, 'Lectures on Aesthetics', in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell 1978).

5 Ch. 5, Carroll 1999.

radical interpretation, as originally developed by Willard Quine and later modified by Donald Davidson. I will apply this theory to 'art' and then give reasons for actually doing so. I will then compare the radical interpretation approach with Morris Weitz' 'open concept' argument and Arthur Danto's 'philosophical' definition of art.

2. Radical interpretation

Suppose I traveled to a remote island where there is a linguistic community that speak a language I have never heard of before. In order to understand the speakers I have to start from scratch; I know nothing about the meaning of any of their utterances, so I am not only an interpreter, I am a radical interpreter. From pairing their utterances systematically with their behaviour and external objects around them my task is to come up with plausible suggestions as to what their utterances mean.

In philosophy of language this idea of radical interpretation is primarily associated with the American philosophers Willard Quine and Donald Davidson. Quine was originally concerned with establishing what has been called the 'indeterminacy of meaning'. Quine wanted to show that meaning is indeterminate in the sense that it is always logically possible to arrive at two different translations that fit the use of the target language equally well:

The thesis is this: manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another.⁶

Davidson has been much influenced by Quine's arguments, but he has in an important sense a more positive view on meaning.⁷ The most fundamental difference is this: Quine seems to think that in order for words to have determinate meaning one has to get hold of some definite mental meanings, some 'inner ideas' that speakers express by their utterances.⁸ Since it is impossible to get hold of such definite 'inner ideas', since competing theories that posit different ideas will match the evidence equally well, meaning is indeterminate according to Quine. Davidson shares Quine's scepticism about the conception that we have access to definite ideas 'inside the heads' of speakers, but he draws a different conclusion. Davidson thinks that since the access-to-inner-idea conception is so manifestly false, we should not accept that it has to be true in order for meaning to be determinate. Davidson

6 W. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960), 27. See also W. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

7 Most of the relevant essays are collected in Davidson's *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

8 W. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', in *From A Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

thinks that the falsity of the conception should lead us to think of meaning in an entirely different way, as essentially connected to language:

What is important is that if meaning and belief are interlocked as I have suggested, then the idea that each belief has a definite object, and the idea that each word and sentence has a definite meaning, cannot be invoked in describing the goal of a successful [radical interpretation] theory.⁹

Meaning is still indeterminate, but only in the sense that “when all the evidence is in, alternative ways of stating the facts remain open”.¹⁰

From his starting point a radical interpreter does not know what the object language means. In accordance with the rejection of the inner idea picture of meaning it is also important that he does not assume that the speakers have definite inner mental ideas that they express by their utterances. From such a starting point it is, according to Davidson, possible to arrive at a theory of meaning for the object language:

A theory of interpretation for an object language may then be viewed as the result of the merger of a structurally revealing theory of interpretation for a known language, and a system of translation from the unknown language into the known.¹¹

Davidson’s fundamental idea is that one can arrive at such a theory by assigning truth-conditions to utterances of the object language. Consider the following sentence:

(1) The sentence ‘Vann er vått’ is true if and only if water is wet.

It would fall outside the main focus here to explain Davidson’s theory of truth and truth-conditions in details, but the fundamental idea is not too complicated. That idea is that via T-sentences (as they are called) like (1), one can get from a position where one does not take meaning but only truth for granted, to a position where one also knows what a sentence means. On the left side of the phrase ‘_ is true if and only if _’ a sentence is mentioned: by placing it within quotation marks we have not taken it for granted what it means. On the right hand side a sentence is used, as we understand it in our own language. The whole T-sentence translates the mentioned sentence by stating its truth-conditions.

By systematically studying the behaviour of speakers of the object language, by comparing their utterances with objects in their environment and other utterances they make, one can formulate plausible T-sentences for their sentences. According to Davidson,

9 ‘Belief and the basis of meaning’ in Davidson 1984, 154.

10 Ibid, 154.

11 ‘Radical Interpretation’, in Davidson 1984, 130.

since the T-sentences specify truth conditions they tell us what the sentences of the object language mean.¹²

The above sentence was construed as an interpretation of a Norwegian utterance into an English. But the theory also applies within languages. We are, according to Davidson, all radical interpreters:

The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question: how can it be determined that the language is the same? ... All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation.¹³

Davidson's point is that interpretation of other speakers always has to be based on systematic studies of their behaviour and environment. The situation is in principle the same whether interpretation happens within languages or from one language into another.¹⁴ The difference is only that when one assumes that another person really speaks the same language as oneself, the T-sentences become homogenous; the sentence that is mentioned is also used. For the sentence 'Snow is white' the T-sentence with in English becomes

- (2) The sentence 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

As with a translation from one language into another this T-sentence specifies the meaning of a sentence. On the left side of the predicate 'is true if and only if' the sentence is mentioned, not used. No meaning is therefore taken for granted. On the right side of the truth-predicate the sentence is used with its ordinary meaning taken for granted. A statement of its truth-conditions translates the mentioned sentence. In this way the concept of truth bridges the gap between the non-semantic and the semantic.

4. A complication

There is one complication that should be addressed before it can be explained how one can use radical interpretation on the word 'art'. Consider the two T-sentences

- (3) The sentence 'Water is wet' is true if and only if water is wet.
(4) The sentence 'H₂O is wet' is true if and only if water is wet.

Both (3) and (4) are true. Since the right hand sides of these two T-sentences are identical, the idea that we can specify meaning

12 Ibid, 133–39.

13 Ibid, 125.

14 In a sense Davidson thinks the 'sameness and difference of language' distinction is questionable, since what is relevant for interpretation always is the same, namely radical interpretation. See his 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*, eds R. Grandy and R. Warner (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

by specifying truth-conditions seems to imply that the mentioned sentences have the same meaning. But only (3) specifies the meaning of the sentence of the object language, for the word 'H₂O' does not mean the same as 'water'. The reason is this: consider a person with a normal 'layman' understanding of 'water' who does not have chemical knowledge. Such a person does not accept 'Water is H₂O'. If 'water' meant the same as 'H₂O' then anyone who understands 'water' should understand that 'Water is H₂O' is true.¹⁵

Davidson's original solution to this problem was that one can find the correct truth-conditions, the conditions that really illuminate meaning, by using what he called 'the principle of charity'. This principle says that if one has to choose between two competing T-sentences, or more generally two competing translation manuals, one should choose the one that to the largest extent makes the utterances of the object language true.¹⁶

However, this strategy does not have the needed resources for excluding true sentences like (4) from the translation manual. What one needs is a constraint on radical interpretation that implies that sentences like (4) do not end up in the translation manual, even though they are true and therefore formulated in accordance with the principle of charity.

John Foster and John McDowell have suggested such a strategy.¹⁷ They suggest that Davidson's principle of charity is replaced with a principle of intelligibility. According to this principle one, should not simply choose the T-sentences that maximise truth. One should choose the T-sentences that make the speakers of the object language as intelligible as possible, viewed from our own perspective. The sentence (4) does not maximise intelligibility in the same way as (3). Consider again the above non-expert about the microstructure of water who utters 'water is wet'. If it is postulated that his sentence means that H₂O is wet, then we should also expect him to assent to sentences like 'Water is H₂O' or at least to have some chemical knowledge. His refusal to accept 'Water is H₂O' would be unintelligible.

The principle of intelligibility is also reasonable for another reason. Suppose we are to interpret a group of speakers who have a religion that is significantly different from what we believe in. The principle of charity dictates that we do not report these speakers as having religious beliefs that we think are massively false. But the right thing to do, intuitively, is to report them as having such beliefs. If one uses the principle of intelligibility, then one can ascribe to them such beliefs. One is able to explain

15 See H. Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality*, Vol 2. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), T. Burge, 'Individualism and the Mental', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* Vol 4 (1975), and C. Peacocke *A Study of Concepts* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992).

16 Davidson 1984 (above), 125–141.

17 J. McDowell, On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name, *Mind* 86, 1977, and J. Foster, 'Meaning and Truth Theory' in *Truth and Meaning*, ed. G. Evans and J. McDowell. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

and predict their behaviour in religious contexts in an intelligible way, by ascribing to them underlying religious beliefs that we think are massively false.

These objections to the strict use of the principle of charity seem persuasive. The idea of radical interpretation should not be paired with the principle of charity but with the more comprehensive principle of intelligibility.

In the following I will assume that the radical interpretation approach is an approach to meaning that is plausible. The question before us is how the approach has significance for the issue of what 'art' applies to. One could discuss the theory in connection with expressions in other languages that would be translated into 'art', like the Norwegian 'kunst'. As emphasised, radical interpretation is a general theory about meaning.

5. Radical interpretation and 'art'

An important idea in radical interpretation theory is, as showed above, that all understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation. Radical interpretation is not just something one explicitly can use in order to interpret other speakers. It is something we use all the time, also when we interpret 'art' utterances of people who speak the same language as ourselves. This is not, obviously, something we are introspectively aware of. But the reason for holding that we use radical interpretation is not that we are consciously aware of this. The reason, Davidson would hold, is that the only way to understand a speaker and more generally a language is to use radical interpretation.

Suppose, then, that a speaker who seems to be a fairly normal competent speaker of English sincerely utters '*Mona Lisa* is a piece of art'. This constitutes plausible evidence for interpreting his utterance by the following T-sentence:

- (5) The sentence '*Mona Lisa* is a piece of art' is true if and only if *Mona Lisa* is a piece of art.

Suppose also that the speaker sincerely assents to 'Art can be beautiful'. This sentence is interpreted like this:

- (6) The sentence 'Art can be beautiful' is true if and only if art can be beautiful.

The sentences (5) and (6) tell the interpreter something about what the speaker means by 'art'. (5) tells him that the speaker understands the word 'art' such that it applies to the object that is in

fact the painting *Mona Lisa*. (6) tells him that the speaker thinks the word applies to some possible object that is beautiful.

A statement that explicitly says something about, or has obvious implications for, what an expression means can be regarded as a *meaning-explication* of the expression.¹⁸ The statement 'A bachelor is an unmarried man' is a meaning explication of the word 'bachelor'. As I understand the idea of a meaning-explication here, every statement that contains minimal or substantial information about a term's application conditions is a meaning-explication of that term. In this sense (5) and (6) are meaning-explications of 'art' as the word is understood by the speaker in the imagined example. They say something about what 'art' means for the speaker when they say something about what 'art' applies to for the speaker.

(5), (6) and other T-sentences derived from interpretation of the speaker can help an interpreter towards a more complete meaning-explication of 'art' as the word is understood by the speaker. The interpreter finds himself with a long conjunction like the following: 'Art can be beautiful and *Mona Lisa* is a piece of art and p and q and...' where 'p' and 'q' are right hand sides of other T-sentences. Such a complex conjunction constitutes, from the interpreter's point of view, a more complete meaning-explication of the word 'art' in the speaker's idiolect.

Not all sentences involving 'art' that the speaker is willing to assent to will be regarded as equally important. Two grammatically different sentences might also contain the same information (compare 'Art is made by artists' and 'Artists make art'). Some sentences will also be more informative about the speaker's understanding of 'art' than others (compare the uninformative 'Art is made by artists' and (5) above). By arranging the information contained in the complex conjunction derived from the T-sentences it might be that the interpreter can arrive at a less complex meaning-explication of 'art'. However, it is not given in advance that this can be done. Radical interpretation theory, as I understand the approach here, is neutral with respect to this further issue.

So far I have focused on an imagined 'one-to-one' case where one interpreter interprets one speaker, but the situation is in principle the same for a whole language. A person's conception of what 'art' means within English is based on interpretation of speakers he regards as speakers of English. Sentences involving 'art' they assent to constitute the basis for T-sentences that partially specify the meaning of 'art'. Suppose an interpreter thinks

18 T. Burge, 'Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind' *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, 1986. One of Burge's examples involves the idea that 'Furniture that more than one person can sit in' is a meaning-explication of 'sofa'.

that speakers of English are willing to assent to (5) and (6). Then he will regard (5) and (6) as partial meaning-explications of the English word 'art'.

It would be wrong, of course, to assume *a priori* that all competent speakers assent to (5) and (6). But successful radical interpretation is not dependent on it being clear what competent speakers agree about. Radical interpretation is very much a 'floating enterprise'. Conceptions of what 'art' means are formed. When new evidence emerges these conceptions are revised. This is exactly the same process as the process a field linguist goes through when his aim is to make an explicit translation of a foreign language.

There would be something special about 'art' if the word had no meaning-explication at all. But it has an explication, the reason is this: the word 'art' is an English word. One might think that its meaning is somewhat vague, but it has surely some determinate meaning (Compare 'art' with a meaningless sound. People also tend to accept, for instance, sentences like 'The word "art" is a noun that applies to many sculptures and paintings that can be found in museums'.)¹⁹

According to radical interpretation theory, 'art' gets its meaning in radical interpretation. The only way 'art' could get meaning in such a process is in T-sentences that translate utterances that involve 'art'. But such T-sentences are, as shown above, identical to meaning-explications.

6. The meaning of 'art'

How is the radical interpretation approach relevant for analyses of the concept of art? It is relevant in the trivial sense that 'art' means *art*. If one thinks of the concept *art* as identical to what 'art' means, then a radical interpretation analysis of 'art' is an analysis of how one more precisely should understand the concept *art*.

The conception of the meaning of 'art' implicit in the radical interpretation approach should, more precisely, be understood like this: the full explication of the meaning of 'art' is the explication in a complete interpretation of the English word 'art'. The complete explication is, metaphysically, the set of meaning-specifying T-sentences that contain all the information that is relevant for the meaning of 'art'. As long as the radical interpretation approach is plausible in general, as I have assumed that it is, the constitutive implications for the meaning of 'art' are equally plausible. These implications can be understood in three different ways.

19 I think there are some interesting parallels between ethics and the question of what art is. In ethics there are many everyday judgements we agree about. The reason this is easily forgotten is that philosophers, naturally, tend to focus on disputed cases. There are, similarly, many everyday statements involving 'art' that competent speakers seem to accept.

The metaphysics of meaning. The radical interpretation approach is inconsistent with other approaches. According to radical interpretation a speaker's utterances get meaning within a 'third person perspective', from the perspective of an interpreter. This is inconsistent with theories that hold that we have, from our different 'first person perspectives', privileged access to what we mean by the words we use.²⁰

Furthermore, according to the radical interpretation approach the meaning of 'art' is not a straightforward definition, inner idea or qualitative state associated with objects or properties that fall under the concept of art. It is also dubious that the approach is consistent with the idea that the meaning of 'art' is the total use of the word as this idea sometimes is associated with Wittgenstein.²¹ There are, after all, uses of 'art' that are not part of sincere utterances that will be translated by T-sentences.

Epistemology. I have emphasised the independence of the metaphysical and the epistemological aspects of radical interpretation. The significance of the approach for the question about the nature of art is very much connected to the metaphysical aspects, but some points should be made about the epistemological dimension.

Suppose that one wants to know what the meaning of 'art' is. If the radical interpretation approach is correct, this knowledge has to be arrived at through a radical interpretation process, not by examining one's own understanding of the word. It would also be wrong to focus on inner experiences, associations or external objects with properties that one thinks fall under the concept of art. In short, the theory of radical interpretation makes special assumptions about how one should proceed in order to find meaning-explications of 'art', assumptions that are not made in traditional analyses of the concept of art. In discussions of the nature of art it has not, after all, been common to use notions as that of a T-sentence.

Of course, it is a good question exactly what the correct meaning-explications are. But one should really think of this inquiry as a process. If the aim is to decide what 'art' means the starting point should be to ask if there are ideas about art that English speakers seem to accept. Suggestions can then be modified or falsified on the basis of reflection or empirical observations. The aim should be to find something that seems reasonable in the light of the available evidence.

It is also important to remember that the difficulties facing interpreters of 'art' are, in principle, exactly the same as those a

20 The most famous proponent of the first person perspective is probably Descartes. Davidson often contrasts his own view with what he thinks of as the 'Cartesian perspective'.

21 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

field linguist faces when he interprets a totally new language. In both cases one needs to decide who are to count as speakers of the language, and one needs to decide when the empirical data are sufficiently rich for forming plausible hypotheses about what the expressions mean. This means that it would be implausible to hold that the radical interpretation approach to the meaning of 'art' is unreasonable because of these difficulties. For then one also has to accept that it is unreasonable for the field linguist to use radical interpretation. But he has no other choice, and as long as we really manage to interpret new languages the difficulties are somehow overcome.

A related equally unconvincing objection says that in deciding who are to count as competent users of 'art' one has to appeal to a conception of what 'art' means. The idea would be that only those who have this conception should be thought of as speakers to be represented in the analysis. This would undermine the significance of the radical interpretation approach. If one already knows what the correct conception of art is, then there is no point of using radical interpretation in order to determine what it is.

The answer to this objection is again that translations of new languages must manage to decide who are to count as speakers of the language without knowledge of the content of the language in the first place. As long as they succeed in doing that there is no reason why one cannot do the same in connection with 'art'.

Reductionism. The radical interpretation approach is reductive in the sense that the meaning of 'art' is derived from a basis where one does not take the meaning of 'art' for granted. The basis is sincere 'art' utterances, behaviour and objects in the environment of speakers of the object language, specified in a non-semantic way.

This differs from theories that start out with some minimal view about what 'art' means, or what the concept of art applies to, and then seeks to build on or modify that view. The radical interpretation approach therefore escapes circularity objections that have been raised against views such as the institutional definition of art. Carroll formulates this definition as the claim that an object *x* is a piece of art 'if and only if (1) *x* is an artifact (2) upon which someone acting on behalf of a certain institution (the art world) confers the status of being a candidate for appreciation'.²² In this definition the concept of art, or more precisely the concept of an art-world, is appealed to in the explanation of what art is. The definition is therefore circular and not fully explanatory. The radical interpretation approach escapes this problem.

22 Carroll 1999, 227.

7. Conceptual analyses

Before I make some points about conceptual analysis of the concept of art it is necessary to say something about conceptual analysis in general.

As long as one accepts that some speakers of English might understand 'art' in a way that is different from how the word should be understood, one also has to accept that there is a conceptual distinction to be drawn between a normative correct understanding of 'art' and a less-than-complete understanding that some people might have. Tyler Burge writes:

The expressions a subject uses take on a certain inertia in determining attributions of mental content to him. In particular, the expressions the subject uses sometimes provide the content of his mental states and events even though he only partially understands, or even misunderstands, some of them. Global coherence and responsibility seem sometimes to override localized incompetence.²³

Burge's influential idea is that a partial understanding of a term can be sufficient for possessing the concept that the term literally expresses, if the person in question is willing to defer to the correct use of the term. Philosophers have often thought of such persons as 'consumers' of the correct understanding, while experts who have a complete understanding have been thought of as 'producers' of the correct understanding.²⁴ Insofar as consumers express the same concepts as producers they should also be regarded as speakers of the same language. An analysis of what speakers of a language mean by an expression, of what the public meaning of the expression is, should therefore represent the understanding of both consumers and producers. A theoretical analysis of the normative correct understanding, on the other hand, should focus on a producer understanding.

A comparison with two clearer concepts can make the distinction between consumers and producers clearer. An analysis of what English speakers mean by 'water' will not purely be an analysis of the natural kind expert concept of water, the concept that applies to nothing but H₂O. The reason is that some consumers of 'water', speakers who use the word competently in normal everyday contexts, do not know that water is made up of H₂O molecules.

While the 'expert' concept *water* is a natural kind concept, the concept of a carburetor is a functional concept. Every device that

23 Burge 1979, 114.

24 H. Putnam, 'The Meaning of Meaning', in Putnam 1975. See also G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

has the function of mixing fuel and air into combustion engines is correctly called a 'carburetor'. This is the expert understanding of 'carburetor' that producers have. A conceptual analysis of what the correct, normative understanding of 'carburetor' is should yield this understanding. But an explication of what the public content of 'carburetor' is cannot be the suggestion that 'carburetor' simply means 'device that mixes fuel and air into combustion engines'. For this definition does not represent the way consumers understand the word.

Similarly with 'art'. Analysing the producer understanding of 'art' is one task. Just as in any other areas where one has done conceptual analysis it is this normative understanding that theorists first and foremost have focused on. This understanding is arrived at on the basis of theoretical reflection, and one has traditionally invoked notions like representation and resemblance. To focus on what consumers and producers mean by 'art' is to adopt a more comprehensive focus. Radical interpretation of the English word 'art' has this more comprehensive focus.

It seems to me that many attempts to analyse the concept of art have not been clear about the producer-consumer distinction. In connection with the radical interpretation approach this has, I believe, implications for the plausibility of some well-known arguments. In the remainder of this section I will explain what I mean on the basis of a discussion of Morris Weitz's 'open concept' argument:

'Art' itself is an open concept. New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge, which will demand decisions on the part of those interested, usually professional critics, as to whether the concept should be extended or not. Aestheticians may lay down conditions but never necessary and sufficient ones for the correct application of the concept. With 'art' its conditions of application can never be exhaustively enumerated since new cases can always be envisaged or created by artists or even nature, which would call for decision on someone's part to extend or to close the old or invent a new concept.²⁵

Weitz' argument can be formulated as follows:

- (P1) The ever-changing, ever-evolving concept of art has a content that no definition can capture.
- (P2) If (P1), then it is not possible to define what art is (art is an 'open concept').
- (C) It is not possible to define what art is.

25 M. Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol.15 (1956).

The radical interpretation approach is consistent with (P1) when (P1) is understood as the claim that it is impossible to define a producer understanding of 'art'. The reason is that radical interpretation is not targeted at analysing what producers of 'art' mean by 'art'. Whether or not it is possible to define such an understanding is something the approach has no implications for.

The radical interpretation approach, however, is inconsistent with (P2) as long as (P2) is understood as the claim that it is not possible to define art *at all*. Weitz thinks that the impossibility of defining the concept of art by means of a theoretical vocabulary implies that it is not possible to define what art is at all. But it is false to think that if it is not possible to define the expert concept, then it is impossible to explicate what 'art' means in English. One should not accept (P2) without further argument.

The problem is in fact more acute since I have, in effect, argued against (P2). As long as 'art' has meaning, then the radical interpretation approach guarantees that there is, metaphysically, an explication of its meaning in the form of T-sentences that translate relevant information about the meaning of 'art'. This explication specifies what 'art' applies to and therefore gives sufficient and necessary conditions for something to be art. An explication of this meaning is therefore a definition. (P2) is false since there is a definition of 'art'.

But what about the claim that a definition must incorporate possible future changes? This is, again, too demanding. If there is a meaning-explication of what 'art' means at any given time, then that is a definition of art at that time. There is a meaning-explication at any given time. Since such explications are definitions there is therefore a definition at any given time.

Some would perhaps respond that Weitz never had the public meaning of 'art' in mind, that he never meant to focus on both consumers and producers. His conclusion could then be understood as the idea that the impossibility to incorporate possible future changes means that it is not possible to define a producer understanding. As said above, the radical interpretation approach has no strict implications for such a view. But it still suggests that there exists an expert definition. For as long as 'art' has a public meaning definition, why should it be impossible to define a producer understanding?

This might perhaps not be a full eternal definition, so Weitz' idea that there is no such definition could be intact. But much of the air would go out of the balloon if there is, metaphysically, a definition of the expert concept. It is, at any rate, clear that Weitz

wanted his argument to be more comprehensive. His aim was to show that it is not possible to define art at all.

The general lesson to be learned from this discussion of Weitz' argument is that any conclusion about the normative producer understanding of 'art' cannot automatically be inflated into a more comprehensive conclusion about the public meaning of 'art'. The implications for the status of the public meaning of 'art' that the radical interpretation approach has are, furthermore, inconsistent with views that imply that it is impossible to give any kind of definition of art.

8. Danto's philosophical definition

I have argued that the radical interpretation approach has a wider focus than some traditional analyses of the concept of art. At this stage some might hold that there are other contemporary attempts to analyse the concept of art that has such a wide focus as well. I think, however, that there are important differences. In this section I will elucidate the radical interpretation strategy further by comparing it with Arthur Danto's 'philosophical' definition of art.²⁶

Danto's starting point are post-Wittgensteinian objections to classical attempts to define or break down the concept of art. Danto thinks that much of this criticism was presented within a traditional framework. According to Danto, when pop art came on the arena this framework lost its validity, with the consequence that traditional discussions were left in confusion. What pop art in reality showed, Danto held, was that the debate had been too narrow:

It seemed to me that pop, however unlikely it may have appeared to those unsympathetic with it (to most of my friends who were artists, for example) had finally discovered the true form of the philosophical question about art. Pop had made it possible for philosophers to address art philosophically. Instead of attempting to define art as such, the problem, far more tractable, was to distinguish philosophically between reality and art when they resembled one another perceptually.²⁷

Danto thinks that in order to be able to evaluate and appreciate pop art as art, one has to widen the perspective. One can no longer use notions from the traditional framework. These frameworks are simply inadequate for the task of analysing pop art. One has to use other notions that are suitable for pop art, but such notions have to come from philosophy, not from traditional aesthetics.

²⁶ Three central works are A. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cam, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), and *Philosophizing Art* (Berkeley/LA: University of California Press 1999).

²⁷ Danto 1999, 5.

The two central philosophical ideas in Danto's analysis of art is that a work of art must have *representational content* in the sense that it has to be about something, and that it has to *embody* that content.²⁸ According to Danto, this analysis can be used to explain why something like Warhol's famous *brillo box* is a work of art while ordinary Brillo cartons in supermarkets are not. The ordinary cartons are not about anything, the only content they have are the soap pads inside. Warhol's brillo box, on the other hand, is not about soaps. Warhol's box has representational content. It might not be obvious what it represents, but what is important is that it invites interpretation. As long as it does, then it has representational content that is different from the literal content the ordinary boxes have.

Danto thinks that if there is going to be a definition that captures both contemporary and earlier art, it has to be a definition along the lines just suggested:

If there is to be a definition of art that fits contemporary art as well as previous art, it has to be consistent not only with the fact that there are no limits on what can be art but also with the possibility that artworks and mere objects can resemble one another to any degree whatever.²⁹

There are similarities between Danto's views and the radical interpretation approach. Both have a wide scope, and both think that there is something essential about art to be found within that scope. They are both opposed to relativism and Weitz's 'open concept' idea, and none of the approaches seeks to define art by focusing on resemblance or in any other traditional way.

But there the similarities stop. Danto's definition is really an attempt to define art in a classical way, in the sense that it aims to find necessary and sufficient condition for something to be art. The difference between Danto's views and classical views is that Danto uses philosophical notions like representation and aboutness in order to be able to include varieties of contemporary art.

The radical interpretation approach on the other hand in no way attempts to give necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be art, it does not have a normative aim of this kind. What it does is to make a metaphysical claim about the unarticulated meaning-explication in the common understanding of speakers of a language; the public meaning of 'art' is identical to this explication of 'art'.

This difference raises an interesting issue. Danto's aim is not to say what the public meaning of 'art' is. His aim is to find a definition that fits the variety of art. But how is one supposed to know

28 Ibid, 8.

29 Ibid, 8.

when the definition is correct? It seems reasonable to suppose that insofar as some view on the nature of art is correct or not, its correctness cannot be judged solely against one's own private understanding of 'art'. For in that case the discussion would be purely subjective; one could choose the understanding one wants in the first place and then find an analysis that matches that understanding.

A more objective basis for evaluating attempts to define the concept of art is needed, and it is hard to see how it could be incorrect to include the public meaning of 'art' in that basis. That is, after all, what one seeks to build the analysis on. It would, at any rate, be useful to know if a definition is consistent with the meaning of 'art'. There are, therefore, good reasons for analysing the public meaning of 'art'. Here at this the initial stage of the analysis, it seems to me, is where there is no help to be found in Danto's views.

The radical interpretation approach on 'art' that I have outlined is aimed at this first stage. It is focused on explicating what the English word 'art' means, what speakers of English mean by their 'art' utterances. Far from being incompatible with attempts to analyse the concept of art, the theory of radical interpretation therefore goes hand in hand with conceptual analysis. The approaches simply have different focuses. Conceptual analyses focus on finding necessary and sufficient conditions for something to represent a normative understanding of 'art'. The theory of radical interpretation, on the other hand, tells us what the public meaning of 'art' metaphysically is, and how one should proceed in order to find meaning-explications. Insofar as attempts to analyse the concept of art aim to start out with this public meaning, radical interpretation is fundamentally important in aesthetics.

