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Danto/Margolis Debate”

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Experiencing Culture: Reconsidering the Danto/Margolis Debate

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1. Introduction

It is a peculiar claim for one noted theorist of the arts to claim that another denies the reality of the cultural world. Even more so if the target of that claim is Arthur Danto, whose work set the agenda for the majority of Anglo-American philosophical inquiry into the arts for the last half century. Even if the charge against Danto were merited on philosophical grounds, it would still stand in serious need of qualification if, for no other reason, Danto's second career as the art critic for *The Nation*. It would be odd, at the very least, if a theorist and critic of the arts were to imply that the objects of his criticism were somehow unreal, while simultaneously offering evaluations of their merits and meaning as artworks. Yet, this is exactly the criticism that Joseph Margolis has leveled against Arthur Danto. To be fair to Danto, Margolis does not claim that Danto himself denies the existence of paintings only that "his theory precludes their existence" (Margolis 2009b, 131). If true, Margolis's criticism would strike at the very heart of Danto's achievements as a philosopher and art critic and since Margolis's criticism stems from his own pragmatically informed theory of the arts, the best way to understand the nature of the criticism is to put it in the context of the two aesthetic theories writ large.

Margolis's criticism targets Danto's well-known theory of the indiscernibility of a work of art and a "mere real thing" and the dispute rests on the vexed questions of what one perceives when they experience a work of art. If the claim Margolis makes against Danto is correct, then the theory of perception required to maintain the indiscernibility thesis is precluded

by Danto's very own theory of art. If it can be shown that Danto is committed both to his core thesis about art as stated in "The Artworld" paper of 1964 and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* of 1981, and to what Margolis claims to be his "phenomenal account of perception," then Margolis has exposed a severely damaging inconsistency at the heart of one of the most noted theories of art in the second half of the 20th century. This paper is a reconsideration of the Danto/Margolis debate especially as it pertains to the differing accounts of perception that form the basis of the disagreement between Danto's and Margolis's theories of art. I shall argue that Danto is committed to a theory of perception that is more closely aligned with the phenomenological theory of perception put forward by Joseph Margolis than with Danto's own theory that postulates the perceptual identity of a work of art and a mere real thing.

2. Two theories of perception

Margolis frames the issue in a question when he asks "what shall we say when leading theorists of the arts—Arthur Danto, most notably—commit themselves to the *denial* of the reality of the cultural?" (Margolis 1999, 57). Since the mere statement of the charge is less than illuminating on its own it will first be necessary to understand what Margolis means by the "reality of culture" and how this understanding may or may not be ruled out by Danto's theory. The central issue rests on a difference between Margolis's and Danto's theories of perception and the use to which Danto puts his account in the formulation of his indiscernibility thesis. Put more generally the two differ on what it is exactly that we *see* when we perceive a work of art.

For Danto, to see something as a work of art requires something that he famously said "the eye cannot descry, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld" (Danto 1964, 580). This conclusion follows from the perceptual indiscernibility of a work of art and a "mere real thing." Danto's argument runs as follows: 1) if art theory is required to see something as art, then discerning something as a work of art cannot be done by perceptual means alone. 2) Since there are both actual and hypothetical instances of indiscernible works of art and mere things that cannot be told apart by mere looking, then 3) the artworld provides the necessary theoretical framework by which one can determine which of two indiscernible objects is a work of art and which one is not. Danto's argument requires the support of what Margolis has

termed a *phenomenal account of perception*. By this Margolis means that the indiscernibility thesis commits Danto to a view of perception in which all we perceive when we look at a work of art are sensory, as opposed to cultural, properties. If artworks are “embodied meanings” or “cultural emergents” the favored terminology of Danto and Margolis respectively, then Danto’s account of perception requires that the culturally emergent meanings that defines something as a work of art cannot be accounted for on the basis of perception. Contrary to this view, if it were possible to perceive cultural properties then, while a work of art and a mere thing may share all relevant sensory or phenomenal properties, and may be indiscernible in that restricted sense, they would fail to share all relevant cultural properties and are thus not truly an indiscernible pair. This is what Margolis calls a *phenomenological account of perception*, where what he calls Intentional (cultural) properties (which distinguish the cultural world from the merely biological or physical) are readily perceivable along the model of the perception of speech.

Danto has stated the divergence between himself and Margolis as follows: “the issue between Margolis and me has to do with the limits of perception, hardly a small subject in philosophy. He approaches it through the phenomenology of cultural experience, I through the analysis of cultural language. My interest is in truth-conditions, his in the richness of culturally enriched minds” (Danto 1999, 331). It is not surprising that a philosopher primarily considered to represent the analytic tradition in aesthetics would view his work as focused on providing truth-conditions while a philosopher informed by the Pragmatic tradition in philosophy would focus on cultural experience. However, what is at stake in this debate is not the validity of Analytic or Pragmatist approach to aesthetics generally, but rather which account of the perception of art best captures the way in which human beings perceive art as it is actually experienced. Margolis’s charge is that Danto cannot have anything coherent to say about the truth-conditions for the application of a cultural term such as “art” in the absence of an understanding of the nature of culturally enriched human selves. Yet according to Margolis, the fact that Danto says plenty about the nature of art, without having provided an account of culturally enriched selves, leads him to hold incoherent positions. It is not a matter of justifying varying philosophical approaches to theorizing about the arts that is at stake but rather whether or not that theorizing about art requires a deeper commitment to an account of what culture is. This deeper understanding of the metaphysics of culture cannot be ac-

completed in the absence of a theory of human selves, a project that has been central to Margolis's philosophy for a number of years. To see the difference between the two theories is to see the overarching philosophical significance of what Margolis dubs the "penetration" thesis, the process of enculturation that results in the creation of "selves," which turn out to be, metaphysically, biological-cultural hybrids and are thus irreducible to merely natural or physical phenomena. The same thesis applies to the cultural products of such hybrid selves like artworks, and (allegedly) makes the artwork/mere real thing perceptual identity untenable given the nature of culture itself. To deny this thesis, is for Margolis, to be guilty of reductionism, and therefore to deny the *sui generis* nature of the cultural world. In what follow I shall defend the penetration thesis and show how, if true, it rules out the account of perception that Danto relies on in constructing the indiscernibility thesis. The result of this argument is that indiscernibility cannot be a central component in a definition or theory of art as Danto supposes.

3. Arthur Danto's theory of art

Arthur Danto has described his theory of art as emerging from, and responding to, two nearly contemporary crises—one in philosophical aesthetics and the other internal to art itself. The beginning of the second half of the 20th century has been called the "neo-Wittgensteinian" moment in aesthetics, when the very attempt to formulate a definition of art, expressed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, was viewed as misguided. The most we could hope for in way of a "definition" of art was a gesture to a series of family resemblances that more or less connect the diverse members of the class "work of art" together.¹

Meanwhile, art practice had been undergoing its own implicit investigation of its nature and had come to manifest the idea that there need not be any perceptual difference between a work of art and a mere thing. Danto's revelation at the Stable Gallery, brought on by an unusual encounter with a brillo box, was to come to understand that art need not look any different from non-art. According to Danto, this amounts to art

¹ See Morris Weitz "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1. (Sep., 1956), pp.27-35, William Kennick "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind*, 67, (July 1958), pp.317-334 and Maurice Mandelbaum "Family Resemblances and Generalizations concerning the Arts" *American Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 2, No. 3. (Jul., 1965), pp. 219-228.

coming to the realization of its own philosophical self-consciousness and signals the end of art understood as progressing in its own internal development. This is not to say that art making has coming to end, only that the art being made after the end of art cannot be seen as the continuation of the narrative of various attempted concepts of art being overturned by new artworks that challenge that definition in a more or less orderly succession. Art after the end of art, according to Danto, is a radical pluralism where anything is possible because art practice is no longer preoccupied with the task of challenging the prevailing conception of its own nature.

The conjunction of these two historical moments impressed upon Danto the dire need for a real definition of art that could both overcome the deflationary Wittgensteinian account of art and provide an answer to why Warhol's *Brillo Box* was art, whereas seemingly perceptually identical brillo boxes in a supermarket were not. These two motivations, although conceivably distinct enough to be understood as unrelated developments, are for Danto, intertwined in such a way that the very conditions necessary for countering the Wittgensteinian position first became conceptual possibilities only after art practice itself had achieved the realization that its own nature is not tied to perceptual criteria. One cannot understand Danto's theory of art without understanding his response to both of these crises and the inter-relations between the two. If art can look exactly like something else that is not art, then only theory, and not perception alone, can tell us what is art and what is not.

There is a Hegelian eloquence disclosed when we view Danto's theory of art in the light of the two motivations that inspired it. Danto's theory of art could not have arisen in any other period in the history of art. Nor could a definition of art have been more needed than at the time when the prevailing view was that there can be no definition of art. It is the confluence of these two occurrences, and perhaps the presence of a painter turned philosopher hanging around the art world of New York in the 1950's and 1960's, that account for the possibility of Danto's theory at all. This section will present Arthur Danto's theory of art by exploring the role of the indiscernibility thesis in the formulation of the definition of art. However, before turning to the examination of those views it will be useful to explore briefly Danto's 1964 paper "The Artworld." This paper is important because it represents Danto's first foray into the philosophy of art. Also, more significantly, it provides the initial statement of the issues for which the rest of Danto's writings on art is the fuller specification.

The two most central ideas in Danto's overall theory of art first expounded in "The Artworld" are the coinage of the term *is of artistic identification* and the assertion of the dependency of artworks on theory. Since it is the case for Danto that in order to identify an object as a work of art requires having mastered the use of this special "is", any definition of art will be dependent on theory because the mastering the use of the *is of artistic identification* requires knowing a fair amount about the history and theory of art. The closest thing to an explicit definition of art that Danto offers in "The Artworld" is just this discussion of the *is of artistic identification*. Although he does not here yet offer a fuller specification of his definition of art, he does suggest that in the very least it is a necessary condition for something to be a work of art that it is described using the *is of artistic identification*. Danto puts it as follows.

For want of a word I shall designate this the *is of artistic identification*; in each case in which it is used, the *a* stands for some specific physical property of, or physical part of, an object; and, finally, it is a necessary condition for something to be an artwork that some part or property of it be designable by the subject of a sentence that employs this special *is*.
Danto 1964, 577

The *a* to which Danto is referring in this passage is one that would figure in the sentence "That *a* is *b*." By using sentences that employ the *is of artistic identification* it is possible to render consistent the claims that (1) "*Brillo Box* is a brillo box" and (2) "*Brillo Box* is not (merely) a brillo box." In the first sentence the "is" is one other than the *is of artistic identification*. These two sentences are compatible because in the second claim the use of the *is of artistic identification* marks off the property mentioned in the first claim as a part of the work of art *Brillo Box*, but also that it possesses properties that mere brillo boxes lack. The part of *Brillo Box* that is designable by the *is of artistic identification* cannot be the same part that is identified in the first sentence. That is, through being the subject of a sentence using the *is of artistic identification*, *Brillo Box* possesses properties of a kind that brillo boxes cannot. Further, the use of the *is of artistic identification* underlies the interpretability of a work of art. One hallmark of Danto's definition of art is that art is the sort of thing of which it makes sense to ask what it is about. It is the characteristic aboutness of works of art that make it possible to interpret an artworks meaning(s). It makes no sense to provide an interpretation of a supermarket brillo box because, insofar

as it cannot be described using the *is of artistic identification*, it does not demand interpretation.²

Danto's discussion of the *is of artistic identification* is of further significance because it provides the framework in which his distinction between a work of art and a mere real thing takes shape. It is the relationship between theory and art that supports the claim that not all things can be art at all times. It is important to note the close relationship between the identification of something as art and the dependence on art theory. In the following passage Danto asserts the dependence of art on theories of art.

What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of *is* other than that of artistic identification). Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. It could not have been art fifty years ago. But then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages, or Etruscan typewriter erasers. The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible.

Danto 1964, 581

What Warhol had achieved with *Brillo Box* was the needed example that illustrates how an artwork can be comprised of a real object (a mere real thing) as a constitutive part and yet not be identifiable with that real thing. This is the case because identifying an artwork that is indiscernible from a real thing *as* that real thing is to use an "is" other than the *is of artistic identification*. *Brillo Box* is a brillo box if what we mean by "is" is just that *Brillo Box* is partially constituted by a real brillo box.³ But *Brillo Box* is not merely a real brillo box because the use of the *is of artistic identification* in describing it provides the theoretical underpinning that constitutes it as a work of art. Without a theory of art to do so, there is no way to tell apart artworks from the mere real things that they look exactly alike. This is not a philosophical theory that could have been formulated without instances of artworks that could not be perceptually discerned from real things that

² As we shall see it is not clear if Danto maintains this claim in his own art criticism.

³ This is not to claim that a real Brillo Box was a *physical* constituent of *Brillo Box* (it was in fact made of plywood), but that *Brillo Box* is both conceptually and perceptually constituted by a real brillo box.

they both are and are not. In fact in order to see this as failing to be an explicit contradiction, one needs a fair amount of philosophical theory, and most importantly, the *is* of artistic identification at their disposal. Art is dependent on theory in the sense that a theory of art is required in order to tell that something is a work of art. Theory is dependent on art in that certain philosophical theories about art (notably Danto's own) were not possible until the artworld had posed the question about the essence of art in terms of the perceptual indiscernibility of a work of art and a mere real thing. There could not be Danto's theory of art without there first having been Warhol in the same way that there could not have been, as Danto states, Etruscan typewriter erasers.

What then is Danto's definition of art? In summing up the gains achieved in his seminal *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Danto has claimed that there are two necessary conditions for something to be a work of art. Namely, (1) that it be about something and (2) that it embody its meaning. Art then, according to Danto, is an embodied meaning that exhibits aboutness. It is appropriate to ask what a work of art is about and how it goes about embodying that meaning, where it is not appropriate to ask these questions about mere things. These two conditions likewise serve as the guiding principles for Danto's art criticism.

In commenting on Danto's statement of his definition of art in *After the End of Art*, Noel Carroll focus on what Danto left out of his definition rather than the two conditions that comprise it. Namely, Carroll is surprised that Danto did not include a third condition along the lines of the claim about the necessity of art theory for the existence of art made in "The Artworld." Carroll proposes that the third omitted necessary condition for something to be a work of art that it "be an instance of an art theory or an intelligible episode in the sort of narrative that such theories generate" (Carroll 1997, 386). According to Carroll, the omission of a condition connecting artworks to theory in conjunction with the fact that the two conditions Danto does supply fail to be jointly sufficient, leaves Danto's definition of art in the embarrassing position of being unable to address the guiding philosophical question of Danto's aesthetics, namely the distinction between a work of art and a mere real thing. Since real brillo boxes are about something (brillo) and they convey that brillo is "clean, bright, modern and that it is associated with freshness, dynamism and liveliness" they seem to fulfill Danto's definition (Carroll 1997, 387). On Danto's proposed definition, then, a distinction could not

be drawn between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and real brillo boxes.⁴ If Carroll's reading of Danto is correct, then the very moment in art history that Danto makes such grand use of as the primary example of the coming to self-consciousness of art's own essence, could not be understood in terms of his own theory. Danto could respond to Carroll by claiming that although real brillo boxes fulfill the two conditions of his definition of art they fail to do so in the right way. That is, what real brillo boxes are about is not properly embodied in brillo boxes in such a way as to convey the meaning in the way necessary for it to be a work of art. To work out what constitutes the way that meaning is to be embodied for it to count as a work of art would seemingly require the addition of a third condition to Danto's definition. Since Danto thinks that the way that art embodies its meaning is determined by the mode of presentation being, at least, adequate to that meaning (where being adequate is understood as being in accordance with a theory of art which explains the relationship between the meaning of work and the presentation of that meaning) it would appear as though the required third condition would be something very similar to Carroll's proposal.

A more serious issue with Danto's definition of art involves the relationship between the definition of art and the end of art thesis. If it is true that Danto's theory of art could only have occurred after art, itself, asked the question of its own identity in the form of an indiscernibility problem, then the failure of his definition of art to distinguish between *Brillo Box* and real brillo boxes would undermine the motivation for the theory in the first place. Carroll describes the tension between these two aspects of Danto's overall theory of art in the following way.

In Danto's view, the philosophy of art had to await that point in art history when the problem of indiscernibles raised its hydra head. That moment arrived when artists like Warhol presented artworks like *Brillo Box* that were indiscernible from their ordinary counterparts. At that point, the question of the nature of art was allegedly put in its proper philosophical form, ready to be answered by theorists like Danto, and art history, as the progressive interrogation of the nature of art, came to an end. Carroll 1997, 389

The adequacy of Danto's definition of art hinges on the truth of the end of art thesis. If Danto's theory of art is only another in the series of art

⁴ In a subsequent section we shall see how Danto himself seems to concede his point in his art criticism where he claims that both *Brillo Box* and brillo boxes are cultural "emergents", a term which he takes from Margolis.

theories that make up the "progressive interrogation of the nature of art" then his definition of art could not be said to pick out the essential nature of all and only artworks at all times. The support that Danto gives for the end of art thesis is that art had come to see that it need not look any different from non-art. That is if art could look exactly like something that was not art, then it is theories of art alone that can distinguish the two. This theory would capture this essence of art because art has exhausted the search for its own meaning and had posed the question of its nature in a philosophical form.

Danto's aesthetics elevates the problem of indiscernibles to the central problem in the philosophy of art. Without this problem Danto could not support his claim regarding the end of art. However, it is less than clear how Danto justifies the assertion that indiscernibility is the central question of the philosophy of art without invoking the theory of art that indiscernibility is meant to provide. While it is no doubt interesting and compelling, it may only represent a small corner of philosophically interesting questions about art and thereby should not be taken as disclosing the essence of art. This is the exact position that Margolis takes on the question of the place of indiscernibility cases in the philosophy of art and, as we shall see, one motivation for his criticism of Danto on perception. Yet, if Danto's elevation of the problem of indiscernibles is mistaken, if the problem of indiscernibles can be explained as a part of a larger art theory, then Danto's end of art thesis loses its primary motivation. The difficulties regarding the relationship between Danto's essentialist definition of art and his historicism strike at the center of the question of the consistency of Danto's theory. As such, the next section shall examine Danto's denial of the historicity of perception as a final prelude to the presentation of Margolis's alternative view.

4. The historicity of perception

Before turning our attention to the specifics of the charge Margolis levels against Danto there is one aspect of Danto's essentialism that warrants consideration at this point because it bears on the dispute with Margolis in a direct way. Significantly, Danto denies the historicity of the eye and by extension the historicity other perceptual modalities as well. In doing so, he equates perception with the physiological attributes of the eye, which, as biological, are not subject to cultural change. It is this claim which most closely serves as evidence for what Margolis calls, in his own idiom,

Danto's *phenomenal account of perception*—the denial that cultural concepts can penetrate perception and thereby inform, at a fundamental level, what we see. This strikes at the heart of the disagreement between Danto and Margolis, so it is important to take note of the claims that Danto has made in this regard.

The thesis that the eye itself is as historical as human knowledge itself—that there are changes in visual perception indexed to and possibly reflective of historical changes, and that there is a history of seeing entirely analogous to changes in artistic production—attributes, in my view, a far greater plasticity to our optical system than the facts of perception seem to me to allow. . . At a level higher than that of optical reality, there is no doubt that people see the same things differently at different cultural moments—the hot springs seen by devout medievals as evidence of hellfire are seen by nineteenth-century entrepreneurs as thermal sanatoria waiting to be exploited—but a robust theory of the eye as historical would require that whatever accounts for these differences penetrates the optical system in such a way that the eye itself changes with history so that, at the level of ophthalmology, individuals see the world differently, or even, in the strongest version of the thesis, see different worlds.

Danto 2001,1

It is clear that Danto identifies the "optical system" narrowly just to include the physiological functioning of the eye. That is, seeing is essential devoid of any conceptual content. This narrow identification leads to the bifurcation, the dualism, between "optical reality" and a "higher reality", which accounts for the differences in seeing at different historical moments. This distinction, however, is an equivocation about the meaning of *seeing*, the very same confined sense of perception that Danto relies on in making his distinction between an artwork and a mere thing in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. But in admitting that devout medievals and romantic era entrepreneurs see hot springs differently is to admit that there is, in fact, a history of seeing, which deeply informs the way that different historical periods will perceive the same phenomenon. In order to maintain the claim that the eye itself does not change (which is trivially true in a biological sense—the question is what counts as a complete perceptual system) Danto has to accept that what we see is uninfluenced by our historically informed cultural situatedness—the very thing that he denies! On this view we would have to make an inference on the basis of sensations devoid of concepts to the presence of hot springs whether construed as a religious symbol or a moneymaking opportunity. That percep-

tion functions in this way, devoid of any use of concepts is questionable. Yet, this is the price that Danto has to pay in order to maintain his entire philosophy of art based on indiscernibles. If concepts do indeed penetrate perception then there is a strong case for the historicized nature of perception that allows for the perception of cultural properties within the confines of a constructivist and historicist account of realism. As Margolis has put the point "the cultural world and the Intentionally qualified things of the cultural world are 'there or exist' in a robustly realist sense so as to be open to being objectively perceived or understood" (Margolis 2009a, 92). There is no other way to account for the claim that artworks are embodied meanings without offering an account of how those meanings might count as being objectively perceived. For Margolis, this means recognizing that objectivity cannot be anything more than a "constructed norm subject to indefinitely extended, historicized revisions" (Margolis 2009a, 94). Since the contributions made by either the historicized perceptual subject, or the equally historicized object of perception cannot be isolated in any single cognitive act on anything like privileged grounds, one cannot, as Danto supposes, make a distinction between different meanings of the same object at different historical times without accepting the penetration of perception by culturally informed, historicized concepts. But to accept this much is to give up on the indiscernibility of artworks and mere things. The same hot springs are objectively perceived, at different historical moments, as either signs of Hellfire or as an economic opportunity because the very notion of objectivity is itself informed by the same forces which account for the history of seeing.

The grounds on which Danto maintains that there is a difference between ocular reality and cultural reality are not clear. But he must maintain this claim at all costs or risk the incoherence of his philosophy of art. Danto has staked everything on this account of perception, which contains, as I have suggested, an equivocation regarding the use of "seeing" but also a questionable distinction between ocular reality and cultural reality, between an ocular system that is limited to the physiological function of our biological equipment and one that extends to include cultural concepts which inform what it is we see when we see anything

5. The charge

Having provided the necessary background to fully comprehend the scope and nature of Margolis's disagreement with Danto it is now possible to

turn to the criticism itself. The clearest statement that Joseph Margolis has provided of his criticism of Danto's aesthetic theory goes as follows:

Danto *cannot*, consistently, treat the Intentional properties of artworks (as I've named them) *as* (that is, referenced in) imaginatively qualified *phenomenological* descriptions of *such works* and, at the same time, *as* only figurative ways of construing (or imagining) the *phenomenal* properties of *mere material things*. . . But that's to say, Danto's theory *precludes* our actually *seeing the Intentional properties of artworks*: and that's to say, his theory precludes the reality of artworks—and thus he fails! He remains silent about persons, but clearly persons cannot be "mere material things." There's the *reductio*.

Margolis 2009b, 130

It is important to note that one fault Margolis finds with Danto's theory is that "he remains silent about persons." This is not simply to fault Danto for failing to be interested in providing a theory about what constitutes a person, because for Margolis, artworks (and other cultural entities) attain their status as metaphysical hybrids (physical/cultural) because they are the *utterances* of encultured selves. Margolis is not providing an argument by analogy from persons to artworks. Rather, he is attempting to provide an analysis of culture that can accommodate and explain the metaphysical nature of both persons (selves) and artworks. The commonality between the two, and the thrust of Margolis's argument, relies on the "penetration thesis" (that is, the process by which the member of the natural kind *Homo Sapiens* are "transfigured" metaphysically by the process of language acquisition (enculturation) into persons and selves and which requires that they be analyzed in a non-reductive way). This thesis will be examined shortly. First though it will be prudent to deconstruct Margolis claim in some detail.

Danto's thesis about the perceptual identity of a work of art and a mere real thing requires that he treats the Intentional properties of artworks (which include the interpretative, representational, semiotic, expressive, symbolic, creative, in short the aesthetic and artistic properties of an artwork) as figurative transformations of the phenomenal properties that are shared by perceptually indiscernible artworks and mere real things (e.g. *Brillo Box* and brillo boxes). Danto himself, in a discussion of the aesthetic difference between brillo boxes and *Brillo Box* claims that the aesthetic difference presupposes the ontological difference. That is, a theory of art is required to tell the difference between the aesthetic qualities (properties) of the two objects. But Danto continues, with the seemingly

damaging admission that the Brillo box is not a "mere real thing" but rather an embodied meaning (he is writing here in the early 1990's, well after the publication of the seminal statement of his theory). The interesting task as he puts it is to "show how the meanings of these two cultural emergents differ, and hence how their aesthetics differ. Or better: to show the difference in the art criticism of these two objects" (Danto 1994, 384). This should already appear at odds with Danto's analysis of the two objects in "The Artworld," as well as with the doctrine that the ontological difference presupposes and accounts for the aesthetic difference. Instead he seems to be claiming that the difference in *meanings* (which would make each ontological equivalents since both are cultural emergents or embodied meanings), and not an ontological difference (between a work of art and a mere real thing), accounts for the aesthetic difference. In "The Artworld" Danto claims, "what in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is (in a sense of *is* other than that of artistic identification)" (Danto 1964, 581). The *is* which indicates the being of the Brillo box in "The Artworld" paper, along with a certain theory of art, keeps the work of art that is perceptually comprised of a Brillo box from collapsing into the *real object* that it is, in the same way that say, it is a theory of art that keeps any painting from collapsing into the stokes of paint that it *is*. Yet, it appears sufficiently clear that we perceive that a painting, in virtue of being about something other than paint, is not identical to the physical medium that composes it. We do not need a theory of art to tell us something that we can plainly *see*. This conclusion is in direct opposition to Danto's further claim that "it is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible" (Danto 1964, 581). Margolis's difference with Danto is captured by Margolis's insistence that it is encultured selves that make both art and theories about art possible, and further that it is from this source that art derives its metaphysical status. The charge then amounts to the claim that Danto's recent view of artworks as embodied meanings is in direct opposition to the theory of art proposed in "The Artworld" and enumerated in more detail in *Transfiguration*.

To see the point is just to read Danto as treating the Brillo box not as a mere real thing in *Embodied Meanings* but rather as a "cultural emergent" which embodies meanings, seemingly in virtue of the way Margolis describes that process. The difference then, between it and *Brillo Box* is

no longer an ontological difference but rather a difference in meaning, a difference in the kind of art criticism that is appropriate for each object. If they are both *art* (or at the very least as beings of the same ontological kind—that of cultural emergent), although artworks are of a different genre, then it is not clear how the ontological distinction between art and non-art can now account for the aesthetic difference. Either Danto has given or must give up the distinction between a work of art and a mere real thing (as exemplified in the case of a brillo box and *Brillo Box*) on which his whole theory of art rests, or he is illicitly making use of *phenomenological* descriptions of these objects for the purposes of art criticism. Take, by way of an example, the description that Danto provides of the meaning(s) of the two objects.

The "real" Brillo box, which actually houses Brillo pads, was designed by an artist, James Harvey, who was a second-generation Abstract Expressionist more or less forced to take up commercial art. It has a very marked style, which situates it perfectly in its own time and in fact there are some very marked connections between it and some of the high art styles of that time. Its style, however, differs sharply from that of Warhol's *Brillo Box*, which has almost no connection to those very high art styles at all. Where Warhol's is cool, it is hot, even urgent, in proclaiming the newness of the product it contains, the speed with which it shines aluminum, and the fact that its twenty-four packages are GIANT SIZE. Speed, gigantism, newness, are attributes of the advertising world's message. . . But none of this pertains to Warhol, who felt no such influence and had no such message. . . Warhol just took all this over without participating in the meaning at all. For him, at best, it would be the sheer banality of the box that was meaningful, and this, internal to his box, would be an external assessment of the commercial container. But to Harvey the box was not banal at all. In any case, in point of meaning the two could not be more different.

Danto 1994, 385

Danto is offering a *phenomenological* description that accounts for the difference in meaning of the two perceptually indiscernible boxes. In treating Harvey's Brillo box as an artwork (or at the very least as an culturally emergent entity) Danto cannot appeal to the *phenomenal* properties of the object alone to account for its meaning, since otherwise Warhol's *Brillo Box* would at least be a strong candidate for sharing the same meaning. Since the meaning of the two could not be more different, Danto has to have recourse to a phenomenological account of the Intentional properties of both objects (in this case he makes heavy use of the stylistic differences) because

no difference is at all possible on a phenomenal account of the properties of the two objects! Either Danto's art criticism requires abandoning the distinction between art and non-art, or accepting Margolis's account of the cultural penetration of perception. In the latter case the two objects are not indiscernibles at all, since one embodies the meanings of newness, speed and gigantism and the other embodies the banality of a box through which art has achieved a critical, philosophical self-consciousness of its own meaning. It isn't at all clear how Danto could get all that from the two objects unless he were to *see* it, understanding perception in the phenomenological sense as the means through which the meaning of an object can come to be known. Cultural objects and perception itself are both products of the historicized activities of human agents. As such, we can *perceive* meaning for the same reasons we can *make* meaning. Both abilities rely on the underlying metaphysical transformation of nature into culture achieved through the unique abilities of human selves. These human powers, in turn, ought to function to inform our best speculations about the nature of the world which we create. Danto can't, or so Margolis claims, have it both ways. Either the phenomenologically informed art criticism quoted above has no grounding in the reality of the objects Danto is describing, or they are not truly perceptual indiscernibles.

All this hinges, of course, on the claim that we can perceive the intentional properties of cultural entities and that the possession of such properties marks off the cultural world from the material world. In order to understand this claim it is essential to understand what Margolis means by the "penetration" thesis in more detail. The issue at hand is:

the matter of the cultural penetration of perception, for instance by linguistic and other enculturing processes—viewed as the direct consequence of the "originary" *Bildung* of human consciousness (in Hegel's sense), that is, the encultured ("second-natured," "external") transformation of the members of *Homo sapiens* into apt selves or persons: hence, also, the answer to the ontological relationship between "content" and "matter" in the arts (again, in Hegel's sense) and, in general, the answer to the difference between material nature and human culture.

Margolis 2009b, 109

The penetration thesis provides the answer not only to the account of perception that is essential in seeing the difference between Margolis and Danto but also to the relationship between culture and nature. *Bildung*, in the sense that Margolis is using the term, is the process of cultural education, which penetrates all the way down to perception, which, in

turn, enables us to *see* the meaning of culture (or to *hear* the meaning of speech) in one perceptual act rather than as something that must be inferred from the content of mere biological processes (perception narrowly construed phenomenally). This culturally informed perceptual ability is a consequence of the metaphysical transformation from a mere biological self to a culturally fluent (encultured) self. Thus, education in this sense is not merely the process of becoming culturally literate (that is, learning about the history and objects that comprise the cultural world) but is rather nothing less than the creation of a human self through our ability to understand language and meaning. In other words, we become self-consciously aware of ourselves as cultural entities, imbued with meaning and as a consequence capable of producing meaning in other entities through transferring our "originary *Bildung*" to them through the act of creation or interpretation.

A further consequence of the penetration thesis is that it makes any reductionist metaphysics incapable of adequately addressing the nature of either human selves or cultural entities as "metaphysical hybrids." This is the core of Margolis's theory of cultural emergence. If you take emergence seriously then it metaphysically rules out reductionism. While it is necessarily true that culturally emergent entities share some properties with their physical or material embodying mediums, their metaphysical complexity cannot be completely understood in those terms. Thus, physicalism is false, and cultural entities can exhibit unique causal capabilities that resist explanation in reductionist terms. Here again is a statement of the penetration thesis, this time stated in terms of the relationship to the emergence of the cultural from the material.

The *sui generis* emergence of the Intentional world entails the contingent "penetration" of the material world by enculturating forces—for instance, the enlanguaged transformation ("transfiguration," in the metaphysical sense Danto opposes) of the biologically determined mental and agential capacities of the members of *Homo sapiens* in whatever way may be demarcated as thinking, perception, affects of behavior.

Margolis 2009b, 134

The natural kind "human," in virtue of the enculturation process, is metaphysically transformed in whatever way is required by the possession of thought and language. Yet, I think Margolis has the direction of entailment reversed. The penetration of the material by the cultural is a *pre-supposition* of the emergence of the Intentional (cultural) world. If not for the unique abilities of human selves, which extends beyond the mere de-

terminated biological limitations persons possess in a material sense, emergence would not be possible. It seems then that there are two cases of emergence that it is important to keep conceptually distinct. The first is the emergence of human selves from their biologically determined base as described by the penetration conjecture. Margolis calls this "internal Bildung". This case of emergence corresponds to the emergence of the cultural world from the physical. The second, and more foundational case of emergence for the existence of the Intentional world is the emergence of the cultural world from mere natural materials based upon the abilities engendered to human beings by the capability of thought and language (the result of the first instance of emergence). This is external bildung. Margolis's account of emergence is best understood in the light of Dewey's use of continuity in his metaphysics. Culture is continuous with nature in that there are no breaks or gaps between the two categories yet; the admission of the reality of culture precludes reducing it to nature understood merely as physical and mechanical processes. The cultural world emerges from emergent selves. That this process cannot be experienced in time, as we find ourselves thrust into an already existing cultural matrix, does not obscure the logical point that human selves presuppose human culture and that human selves require an ontological transformation from the physical to the cultural. Thus, in one sense Margolis is right to say that the emergence of the Intentional world entails the penetration thesis because from the fact that we find a world that is already rich in Intentional properties it must follow that there are competent human selves. Nevertheless, the objection that there was never a time when there were human selves without an emergent Intentional world does not mean that the cultural word existing logically presupposes the existence of its author.

6. Conclusion

The disagreement between Arthur Danto and Joseph Margolis is concerned with how we experience culture. Whereas Margolis's theory of culture explains how concepts penetrate human perception and experience, Danto's theory of art rests on a theory of perception that requires that the difference between art and non-art is imperceptible. As I have argued above, Danto's own art criticism requires accepting a theory of perception that precludes the possibility of the essence of art hinging on the indiscernibility of art and mere real things. Following Margolis, the unique human abilities that account for the possibility of making meaning explains

the perception of meaning as well. The importance of the Danto/Margolis debate is not localized to the narrow question of the essence or definition of art. Rather, the debate points us to an understanding of the nature and power of culturally enriched human selves that make both art, and the philosophy of art possible. The lasting philosophical contribution of Joseph Margolis is that in looking beyond the narrow problems of various philosophical subfields he was able to formulate a richly compelling theory of the human person. Any philosophical attempt to understand the nature of art and the human selves that create is deeply indebted to the work of Joseph Margolis. In fact, there is no better testament to the depth and complexity of the human ability to make meaning than the philosophy of Joseph Margolis.

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