A RECONSIDERATION OF THE ROLE OF THEORY IN AESTHETICS—A REPly TO MORRIS WEITZ

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In the September 1956 issue of this Journal, Morris Weitz published a very important and controversial article about aesthetics. It was such a basic article that philosophers must either agree with it or criticize it. Since I am convinced that there are fundamental difficulties in Weitz's position, I feel obliged to answer it in print as I did verbally at the American Philosophical Association meeting where it was first read.

I

Professor Weitz proposes that we drop the theorist's question, "What is the nature of art?" and ask instead the more fruitful question, "What sort of concept is 'art'?" Following this comes the very important sentence, "Rather than a definition, let us try for a logical description of the actual employment of the concept."

In order to clarify the problem here illustrated, I should like to shift from aesthetics to the philosophy of science. Suppose we imagine a philosopher saying, "It is more fruitful to ask 'What sort of concept is probability?' than to ask 'What is the nature of probability?'" I do not think that we would be tempted to say to such a man, "Probability is not a word and not a concept, though we may refer to probability by means of the word 'probability' and conceive it."

It seems clear to me that Weitz is not concerned with the word "art" as a grammarian might be concerned with it, nor is he concerned with the concept "art" as a logician might be concerned with it. Rather Weitz is concerned with the word "art" as Carnap, for example, might be concerned with the word "probability." Weitz says he wants to try for a "logical description of the actual employment of the concept 'art.'" He does not want to call this a definition, because as he uses the word "definition" it means Aristotelian real definitions.

II

For some reason or other, Weitz insists that in aesthetics "definition, reconstruction, and patterns of analysis are out of place since they distort, and add nothing to our understanding of art." Let us look for a moment at this term "definition." Is it not the case that Weitz is making a kind of definition of art in his answer to the question, "What is the logic of 'x' as a work of art?" And just as it seems to me that definition is in place, not only in aesthetics in general, but even in this particular paper by Weitz, so it seems to me that analysis is similarly in place. When Weitz says that "art" is both descriptive (like "chair"), and evaluative (like "good"), it seems to me that he is clearly making an analysis.

But perhaps Weitz is really telling us that this definition and analysis is not theory in aesthetics but just plain aesthetics. If this is so, I am at a loss to know his justification for his somewhat Pickwickian nominal definition of "theory," a
definition that makes theory in aesthetics look very much like what we would ordinarily call art criticism. Perhaps I should ask what that part of aesthetics which is concerned with definition and analysis should be named, if we refuse to name it theory.

It would seem to me that much of our trouble is in our different conceptions of definition. It strikes me that Weitz has put forward the sort of real definition for the term “real definition” that he objects to having theorists in aesthetics put forward for the term “art.” Is not the term “real definition” an open concept? Is it not indeed as expansive and as adventurous as the concept “art”? Why, then, should we make it a closed concept by defining it as “the statement of the necessary and sufficient properties” of the definiendum? By doing this are we not distorting and adding nothing to our understanding of definition? Such a definition, I am afraid, radically misconstrues the logic of the concept of definition and is doomed to failure.

I am especially surprised to find Weitz taking this archaic view of real definition because in 1949 he was the author of a paper which took a very different view of the matter. This article, called “Analysis and Real Definition,” contained the following passage:

Of course, real definition, at least as it has been conceived and accepted by the whole Aristotelian tradition has experienced much abuse, and deservedly, since it has been so completely tied up with the metaphysical view that what is being defined is certain fixed essences. But there is another sense of real definition, the common sense one, which is that kind of definition in which the properties of a given complex are enumerated; by properties is meant the elements or terms of a complex, together with their characteristics and the relations that obtain among them, and by complex, a fact or group of facts.

Having written this in 1949, Weitz has strangely given up the common-sense notion of real definitions in order to return to the real-definition of the Aristotelian tradition.

It is my own persuasion that the role of theory in aesthetics is to provide this sort of real definitions and that such definitions are far more than “summaries of argued-for recommendations to attend in certain ways to certain features of art.”

III

Since I am going to argue in this section that it is the role of theory in aesthetics to make definitions which clarify our understanding of art, I shall begin by discussing briefly several sorts of definition. The first sort, which Weitz calls real definitions, is of no help in modern aesthetics. But it is possible to think of real definitions as reported definitions or definitions in more or less general usage. In this sense of real definition we do not need to have a statement of the necessary and sufficient properties of the thing defined or a true claim about its essence. We need only have a definition actually in use. Contrasted with real definitions are nominal or stipulated definitions. Such definitions are statements of the author’s intent to use a term in the way the definition designates or stipulates.

In addition to real and nominal definitions there are complete and incomplete definitions. Now I think Weitz is claiming rightly that traditional definitions of art are incomplete. We do not have any definition which completely defines the
term 'art.' This is part of what we mean by saying that "art" is an open concept. However, I do not believe we should say that because we have no complete definition of art's essence, we have no definition at all of art. Certainly many definitions about art and other things in aesthetics are nominal definitions; but I am inclined to think that if all these definitions were merely nominal, we would not be very interested in aesthetics; nor would we be very hopeful that a study of aesthetics would increase our understanding of art. While many of the definitions in aesthetics are nominal ones; I, for one, find a number of definitions which are substantially agreed upon and which I am willing to call real definitions, even if they are not universally agreed upon or complete.

If we are to have any aesthetics at all, we must have some sort of definitions. Unless we have an understanding of the signification of the term "art," how can we write histories, or sociologies, or criticisms of art? To clarify the meaning of the term "art" is a cognitive enterprise, and aesthetics insofar as it is a branch of philosophy can justify its existence only to the extent that it provides a unifying definition in terms of which art can be organized. The definitions in aesthetics serve for writers about art the sort of use served by theories in science. A theory in science is the name for an organizing principle, unifying device, or intellectual hatrack upon which one can hang generalizations or laws. Observations, hypotheses, and laws are made in terms of a physicalistic language or are reducible to such a language. No such reduction is required in the case of theories. Theories have value for science because they are useful in achieving structure and organization. One does not speak of them as true or as false. One judges them rather as useful or not insofar as they are capable or incapable of providing unity to laws and observations contained in science. Likewise in aesthetics, definitions are valuable only if they provide a framework within which cognitive progress can be made in the study of art.