

THE CONCEPT OF ART : A REVINDICATION

For the last two-three decades, speculations on the nature of art tend to treat the term "art" as an "essentially contested concept"¹, including in its domain an amorphous phenomena, having little in common amongst its various dimensions. This confusion in the realm of art has led many thinkers to treat the language of aesthetics as an expression of approval and disapproval and hence as outside the domain of meaningful discourse. This brief note is essentially motivated by a desire to counteract this "dreariness of aesthetics" and to revindicate the meaningfulness of the concept of art.

The present trend in contemporary aesthetics has been largely influenced by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.² Wittgenstein has built his argument around his analysis of general concepts, of which the most representative example cited by him is that of the concept of "game". Wittgenstein starts with an exploration into the essence of game which can capture the essential nature of this concept (he gives the examples of definitions like winning and losing and amusement etc.) on realizing the failure of all attempts at formulating such a definition of "game", he concludes that the word "game" has no definite boundaries. Hence it is not possible to arrive at any essential and exhaustive definition which would manifest all its varied dimensions. He further concludes that between the diverse uses of the word "game", all we find are only certain vaguely perceptible resemblances such as those found in the members of a common family. Wittgenstein says :

"I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances", for the various resemblances between members of a family, build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. Overlap and criss-cross in the same way—and I shall say : games form a family."³

This analysis of Wittgenstein is very ingeniously applied to the domain of art by Morris Weitz.⁴ Quite like Wittgenstein, Weitz proceeds with an enumeration of the various definition of

art viz. art as imitation and as expression, etc. etc. and he concludes that the traditional aesthetics rests on a mistake - it attempts to define art in terms of one essence or another. Analysing the term "art" he says :

"Art as the logic of the concept shows, has no set of necessary and sufficient properties, hence a theory of it is logically impossible and not merely factually difficult."⁵

Furthermore Weitz holds that the disparate usages of the term art show only "family resemblances" and no common essence.⁶ Thus he holds that by ostensive definitions we are able to recognize what is commonly held to be a work of art but nothing more than this. In this context, I wish to submit two points— firstly, I wish to point out that what Weitz holds to be the so-called "properties" of an art object are really only normative definitions of it. If he means by properties these normative definitions (e.g. art is significant form), Weitz' position is undebatable. For if we look upon art as an evaluative term, it is evident that there have been multiple ways of analysing this concept. And these variegated analyses reveal their peculiar modes of fixing the boundaries of the domain of art. But can we really treat them as attempts to seek the ageless essence of art itself? The infinite variety of human creativity shows clearly that different periods of history have unfolded their respective evaluative definitions of art which are varied from an imitative representation of nature to an expression of the latent folds of the human psyche. Wittgenstein and Weitz are undoubtedly right in holding that what one finds amongst these different norms are only family resemblances. But one finds an exaggeration in their analysis when these evaluative definitions are treated as attempts to reveal the possible essence of art.

Secondly, I wish to submit that such an essential definition of art is possible provided we do not confuse normative and descriptive definitions. If we do not confuse the normative definitions of art—the multiple goals of art which furnish the content of art history—with descriptive definitions of the nature of art object, there is certainly a possibility of arriving at a definition that expresses the essence of art.

The clue is given by philosophers from both the East and the West. Abhinavagupta⁷ treats the art object as essentially away from the everyday world of reality, governed by a continuum of space and time relations. Neither it is equivalent to illusions, it projects itself in a world of its own. The actor on the stage is neither living in his own space and time; nor is he living in the space and time of the actor for he is never totally unaware of his own being as distinct from that of the character he is impersonating. Thus according to Abhinavagupta "theatrical spectacle implies the negation both of the real being of the actor and of the real being of the character he is playing. Indeed, on the one side there is the negation of the real being of the actor, and, on the other, the spectator's consciousness does not rest entirely on the being represented (*pratibhāsa*, the represented image, etc.), whose (representation) therefore does not succeed in hiding completely the real being of the actor".⁸

This analysis of the nature of dramatic presentation marks out clearly the peculiar character of art objects—they remain essentially unassimilable with both illusory and real objects. Bullough⁹ has tried to explain this essential "Otherness" of the art object in terms of the category of distance. He holds that the frame of painting, the pedestal of a sculpture and the stage of a theatrical performance separate them from the events in every day life situations. In this unfoldment of the art object in a medium irreconcilable with the real lies the essential nature of art.

It is this discontinuity with the external world which differentiates between art objects and things of utility. This is what is precisely different between Arman's *poubelles* and dustbins used by us in daily life. For when encased in the plastic frames they mark the domain of a different world—not continuous and assimilable into the matrix of ordinary objects directing us towards practical goals of different kinds. Same is true of the *ready mades* of Dada. The "urinal" of Marcel Duchamp when placed in the art gallery ceases to be a urinal and becomes a world by itself, outside both the real and the illusory. This basic character is shared by all arts, whatever be the varied artistic media and the multiple goals pursued by artists in different periods of history.

Undoubtedly this "Otherness" from reality cannot be pointed out and defined in the same manner that we can define "oxygen". But this holds true of a large number of adjectives and common nouns. Moore¹⁰ has demonstrated this in the context of colours—the colour yellow can be defined in terms of its wave lengths but that gives us no clue in our ordinary perception of colour. By ostensive definitions we can conventionalise the usage of the word 'yellow' in terms of a certain set of hues in our visual field. But given a form with yellow and red on two ends with their multiple blends in-between, it will be extremely difficult to point out and objectify where exactly the yellow and red turn into orange. Similarly it will be difficult for us to quantify exactly when we start calling an object aesthetic and when it ceases to be utilitarian. For a large variety of objects swing from one domain to another. And this is not special of the domain of aesthetics, it holds true of all general concepts excepting the concepts of physical sciences which can be reduced to clearcut operational definitions. So there is no reason why we look for cut and dried solutions of the problems of aesthetics, when most of our experience of the external world belies all such solutions.

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NOTES

1. See P. Gallie, "Art as an Essentially Contested Concept" in *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1956), pp. 97-114.
2. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1968).
3. *Ibid.*, No. 67, p. 32.
4. Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (ed.) Joseph Margolis (New York, 1962).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

6. Weitz says : ' The problem of the nature of art is like that of the nature of games, at least in these respects. If we actually look and see what it is that we call " art ", we will also find no common properties—only strands of similarities. Knowing what art is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call " art " in virtue of these similarities '. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

7. Abhinavagupta is one of the most important Indian thinkers of the tenth and eleventh centuries. He is very well known for his commentaries on the ancient Indian treatise on drama *The Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana. These two works are much more than mere commentaries as they represent Abhinavagupta's brilliant analysis of the nature of art object, aesthetic experience and aesthetic meaning.

8. Translated and interpreted by R. Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta* (Rome, 1956), pp. 80–81.

9. E. Bullough, " Psychical Distance as a factor in art and an aesthetic Principle " in the *British Journal of Psychology* (Vol. V, June, 1912).

10. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*.

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