

The Disjunctive Theory of Art: The Cluster Account Reformulated

Francis Longworth and Andrea Scarantino

This paper suggests that art cannot be defined in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Instead, we propose that there are several sufficient conditions for something's being art, and that a successful definition will consist of a disjunction of minimally sufficient conditions. Our proposal owes much to the insights of Berys Gaut's "Art" as a Cluster Concept' but offers a much simpler logical formulation, which, in addition, is immune to the objections that have been raised to Gaut's account. This paper agrees with Gaut's claim that there are borderline cases of art, and suggests that they arise from indeterminacy about the content of some of the minimally sufficient conditions. It is argued that this disjunctive account is superior to classical theories, resemblance-to-paradigm theories, and prototype theories of art.

Introduction

It has proved to be extraordinarily difficult to provide a satisfactory definition of art. Aestheticians have been engaged in the definitional project for most of the twentieth century, but it appears that they have failed to articulate a classical definition, namely a definition in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. All classical definitions face counterexamples: instances of art that do not satisfy the proposed definition, or instances of non-art that do satisfy it.

In this paper, we argue that the project of articulating a classical definition of art is fundamentally misguided, and that this fact provides the best explanation for our collective failure to provide a satisfactory classical definition of art. One response to this failure would be to abandon the definitional project all together. This is what some earlier theorists—e.g. Paul Ziff, Morris Weitz, and William Kennick—have advocated.¹ The response we recommend is different: we propose an alternative account of what a successful definition of art should look like.

In our view, a viable definition of art will consist of a disjunction of what we call *minimally sufficient conditions* for being art, namely sets of non-redundant properties that are jointly sufficient for being art. The *Disjunctive Theory of Art* builds on some of the insights of Berys Gaut's "Art" as a Cluster Concept', and it develops Stephen Davies's suggestion that a cluster account might be captured by a disjunctive definition.² The Disjunctive

1 Paul Ziff, 'The Task of Defining a Work of Art', *Philosophical Review* 13 (1953), pp. 58–78; Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *JAC* 15 (1956), pp. 27–35; William Kennick, 'Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?', *Mind*, 17 (1958), pp. 317–334.

2 Berys Gaut, "Art" as a Cluster Concept', in Noel Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 25–44; Stephen Davies, 'The Cluster Theory of Art', *BJA* 44 (2004), pp. 297–300.

Theory is not subject to the principal objections to Gaut's original account, and, in particular, is not subject to Aaron Meskin's recent 'irrelevant properties objection'.³

Wittgensteinian Opposition to Art as a Classical Concept

A great many art theorists are convinced that art has a classical definition, and are actively engaged in the project of trying to spell it out. We designate the assumption that there exists a classical definition of art as the *Classical Theory of Art* (CTA):

(CTA) $\exists Z$ (Art \leftrightarrow Z), where Z is a non-empty conjunction of properties

Morris Weitz influentially attacked CTA in his seminal paper 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'. Weitz argued that aesthetics is 'a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined'.⁴ Other theorists have echoed this anti-definitionist position.⁵ Influenced by Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblance in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Weitz argued that art is an open concept, that is, one whose 'conditions of application are emendable and corrigible'.⁶ He believed this was due to the very nature of artistic endeavours, which tend to push the boundaries of existing art forms in the search for novelty.

Aesthetic theory, on the other hand, 'conceive[s] the concept of art as closed', namely characterized by settled boundaries captured once and for all by a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of application. When it comes to art, on the contrary, 'unforeseeable or novel conditions are always forthcoming or envisageable'.⁷ When we consider artworks in all of their variety and complexity, Weitz concluded, 'we will . . . find no common properties—only strands of similarities'.⁸ The best the art theorist can do is to explore 'criteria of recognition' for art, namely 'bundles of properties, none of which need be present but most of which are, when we describe things as works of art'.⁹

Weitz's thesis soon met with opposition. Maurice Mandelbaum argued that Weitz's analysis neglected to consider the *relations* between an art object and its social, institutional, and historical context.¹⁰ Once relational properties are included, Mandelbaum

3 Aaron Meskin, 'The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered', *BJA* 47 (2007), pp. 388–400.

4 Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', p. 28.

5 E.g. Ziff, 'The Task of Defining a Work of Art'; Kennick, 'Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?'

6 Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', p. 31.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p. 33. As emphasized by Gaut, "'Art" as a Cluster Concept', Weitz in some passages seems to think of family resemblance another way, suggesting that something is art insofar as it resembles paradigm cases of art (see also Kennick, 'Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?'). This may be called the resemblance-to-paradigm account of art. The two main problems with this approach are its incompleteness (what are the paradigms?) and, most importantly, its lack of normative force (anything resembles the paradigms in some sense). We shall come back to this point later.

10 Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965), pp. 219–228. For more recent developments of these ideas, see Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and George Dickie, *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984).

concluded optimistically, definitions of art in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties *will* be forthcoming. This ‘relational turn’ led to the ‘vigorous resumption of the traditional project of defining art after a brief Wittgenstein-inspired hiatus’.¹¹ As Peter Kivy put it a few years ago, ‘[t]he Wittgensteinian move in the philosophy of art was never a popular one, and at the present time is not a going concern.’¹²

We consider this situation unfortunate. We think that the introduction of relational properties has *not* led to successful classical definitions of art. The unpopularity of the Wittgensteinian move is in our view partially due to specific deficiencies in Weitz’s account that can be easily remedied. One problem is that Weitz’s arguments against classical definitions are not convincing. His claim that classical definitions are ‘logically impossible’¹³ is unnecessarily strong and it is poorly motivated.

First, the failure to articulate a satisfactory classical definition does *not* show that it is logically impossible to articulate one. It does provide *inductive support* for this claim, but this is a far cry from logical entailment. Second, we find the suggestion that art is undefinable because art is an open concept entirely off-target. It is certainly true that artists often tend to push the boundaries of existing art forms in search for novelty. In fact, we think this is a key insight about the nature of art. The deliberate attempt to produce artworks that disregard or even mock existing canons, only to end up producing new ones, is a striking constant in the history of art, most prominently displayed by twentieth-century avant-garde art.

At the same time, we do not think the reason why art systematically evades attempts to classically define it has anything to do with novelty. On one hand, the difficulty of providing classical definitions affects most concepts of philosophical interest. This suggests that the difficulties encountered by the definitional project in aesthetics are an expression of a larger problem also afflicting concepts not tied to novelty (e.g. knowledge, action, moral rightness, causation, emotion). On the other hand, if the pursuit of novelty were constitutive of all art, a classical definition could easily include the ‘search for novelty’ as one of its defining conditions. The trouble is that not all art appears geared towards novelty: some art, e.g. prehistoric art, is aimed at reproducing an existing aesthetic canon rather than at creatively modifying it or reversing it.

The central weakness of the Neo-Wittgensteinian challenge in aesthetics, we think, is that it has yet to offer a clear alternative to the definitional project in its classical version. Weitz’s positive proposal that instead of trying to define art, aestheticians should collect ‘criteria of recognition’ for art is not a viable alternative to the CTA. It is not entirely clear what Weitz meant by ‘criteria of recognition’, but one possible reading is epistemic: criteria by which we *recognize* an object as an artwork. On this reading, Weitz’s account fails to address the expectations of a great many art theorists, who are interested in understanding not only how we recognize artworks, but, more importantly, what properties are constitutive of being an artwork.

11 Daniel Kaufman, ‘Family Resemblances, Relationalism, and the Meaning of “Art”’, *BJA* 47 (2007) p. 280.

12 Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: CUP, 1997), p. 35

13 Weitz, ‘The Role of Theory in Aesthetics’, p. 28.

On an alternative reading, ‘criteria of recognition’ are definitional criteria that aim to tell us under what conditions we *correctly* recognize something as an artwork, which is another way to say which properties are constitutive of being an artwork. On this reading, Weitz’s account is not anti-definitional. But as an account of a non-classical definition of art it is rather under-described. Weitz’s suggestion that artworks share ‘similarities’ consisting of ‘bundles of properties’, none of which are individually necessary, but most of which are present in instances of artwork, falls short of clarifying the logical form that a non-classical definition of art might take.¹⁴

We want to develop the Neo-Wittgensteinian challenge by embracing the definitional project—we do think that art is definable—but by arguing that the appropriate form a definition of art should take is disjunctive rather than classical. Our proposal is a development of Gaut’s ‘cluster account’ of art.¹⁵ Although this account has met with largely negative reviews,¹⁶ we believe that its merits have been overlooked. With a few crucial modifications, Gaut’s account can play a useful role in a revised theory of art.

Art as a Cluster Concept

Gaut’s cluster account is the most recent attempt to revive the Wittgensteinian tradition in aesthetics. Gaut (2000) begins by pointing out that the supposedly more sophisticated relational definitions of art, like their non-relational predecessors, have failed to ‘secure general assent’.¹⁷ He claims that this fact alone justifies the exploration of alternatives. According to Gaut’s own positive proposal, there are a number of properties (henceforth, *crierial properties*) that ‘count toward’ something’s being art, none of which are individually necessary, but which are, in a variety of combinations, jointly sufficient. Gaut writes:

A cluster account is true of a concept just in case there are properties whose instantiation by an object counts as a matter of conceptual necessity toward its falling under the concept. . . . How is the notion of their *counting toward* the application of a concept to be understood? First, if all the properties are instantiated, then the object falls under the concept; that is, they are jointly sufficient for the application of the concept. More strongly, the cluster account also claims that if fewer than all the criteria are instantiated, this is sufficient for the application of the concept. Second, there are no properties that are individually necessary. . . . Third . . . there are disjunctively necessary conditions: that is, it must be true that some of the criteria apply if an object falls under the concept.¹⁸

14 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

15 Berys Gaut, ‘“Art” as a Cluster Concept’, and ‘The Cluster Account of Art Defended’, *BJA* 45 (2005), pp. 273–288.

16 E.g. Thomas Adajian, ‘On the Cluster Account of Art’, *BJA* 43 (2003), pp. 379–385; Davies, ‘The Cluster Theory of Art’; A. Meskin, ‘The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered’.

17 Gaut, ‘“Art” as a Cluster Concept’, p. 27.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

Gaut also suggests that there will be some *indeterminacy* about exactly how many properties need to be present (and in which combinations) for sufficiency. Gaut's account may be represented more formally as follows:

For some concept C, the criterial properties {P, Q, ..., Z} that 'count toward' something's being an instance of C all satisfy four conditions:

(G1) P, Q, ..., Z are jointly sufficient for C.

(G2) Some proper subsets of {P, Q, ..., Z} are sufficient (with some indeterminacy about whether or not a particular subset is sufficient).

(G3) No member of {P, Q, ..., Z} is necessary.

(G4) At least one of {P, Q, ..., Z} must be instantiated.

Gaut (2005) also proposes the following ten criterial properties as 'good *prima facie* candidates for those which should appear in a cluster account'¹⁹ of art:

(i) possessing positive aesthetic qualities (I employ the notion of positive aesthetic qualities here in a narrow sense, comprising beauty and its subspecies); (ii) being expressive of emotion; (iii) being intellectually challenging; (iv) being formally complex and coherent; (v) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (vi) exhibiting an individual point of view; (vii) being an exercise of creative imagination; (viii) being an artifact or performance that is the product of a high degree of skill; (ix) belonging to an established artistic form; and (x) being the product of an intention to make a work of art.²⁰

Gaut claims that cluster concepts cannot be defined in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. This follows from (G3), according to which no criterial property is individually necessary. There are, however, a number of sufficient conditions; that is, a number of ways that an object can qualify as art. It also follows from (G3) and Gaut's suggested list of properties that there are *at least* ten sufficient subsets of properties whose joint instantiation is sufficient for something's being art.

Since there are ten criterial properties, and none of them is individually necessary, it follows that there are ten nine-member subsets containing all but one of the criterial properties that are jointly sufficient for the application of the concept. Given (G1), the joint instantiation of all ten criterial properties is also sufficient, so there are at least eleven distinct ways in which an object can qualify as an artwork. In addition, there are potentially many more sufficient subsets, with fewer than nine properties. Gaut's account is therefore, in contrast to classical definitions, *pluralistic*—potentially *highly pluralistic*.

Gaut finds it intuitively compelling that (G1) is true for art, that is, the instantiation of all of the properties (i)–(x) qualifies something as art—though he does admit that (G1) would have to be revised should clear counterexamples emerge. In support of (G2), Gaut

19 *Ibid.*, p. 29

20 Gaut, 'The Cluster Account of Art Defended', p. 274.

argues on a case-by-case basis. For example, ancient Egyptian art does not exhibit a concern for individuality, and is neither intellectually challenging nor the product of an artistic intention. Intuitively, however, it counts as art. We may point to its beauty, its belonging to an established art form, its ability to express emotions, its complex and coherent form, its complex meaning and its being the product of a high degree of skill, and suggest that all objects that instantiate the same set of properties would also be art, by virtue of having these properties.

Gaut argues for (G3), again, on a case-by-case basis. He believes that none of the properties (i)–(x) is individually necessary for something to be art. For example, some instances of art appear to lack positive aesthetic properties (e.g. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*), some supposedly do not express emotion (e.g. 1960s hard-edged abstractism), some are not intellectually challenging (e.g. traditional religious art, some ancient art), some are not formally complex and coherent (e.g. some modernist films), some do not convey complex meanings (e.g. Aesop's fables), some do not belong to an established artistic form (e.g. ground-breaking art forms), and so on.

Finally, Gaut takes it to be intuitively obvious that failing to fulfil *any* of the properties (i)–(x) qualifies things as non-art (G4), though again admits that a clear counterexample would necessitate an addition to the list; that is, if an object were to instantiate none of the ten properties, yet were clearly art. Gaut's principal objective is to defend the *logical form* of the cluster account rather than the specific *content* of (i)–(x). Any discrepancies that emerge between art theorists' intuitions and the theoretical verdicts delivered by the cluster account are to be dealt with by changing its content rather than its form; that is, by changing the criterial properties that appear on the list.

Substantial criticisms of Gaut's account have been offered by Adajian, Davies, and, most recently, by Meskin.²¹ The objections of Adajian and Davies have, in our opinion, already been successfully rebutted by Gaut himself.²² In this paper, we are principally concerned with Meskin's central objection, which is indeed fatal to Gaut's original account. We will then propose an alternative logical form for the definition of art that is not subject to this objection.

The Irrelevant Properties Objection and the INUS Cluster Account

Meskin has argued that Gaut's formulation of the intuitive notion of 'counting toward' is fundamentally flawed, since it is vulnerable to what we shall call the 'irrelevant properties objection'.²³ The nature and force of this objection is obvious: add to Gaut's ten criterial properties a property that is clearly irrelevant to an object's status as an artwork (such as its having been made on a Thursday²⁴). This new set of eleven properties *still* satisfies Gaut's

21 Adajian, 'On the Cluster Account of Art'; Davies, 'The Cluster Theory of Art'; Meskin, 'The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered'.

22 Gaut, 'The Cluster Account of Art Defended', pp. 273–288.

23 Meskin, 'The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered'

24 Meskin's example.

conditions (G1)–(G4), since adding an irrelevant property does not alter the sufficiency of a sufficient set, and an irrelevant property is clearly not an individually necessary property. Hence, a property that is irrelevant to something's being art would, according to the cluster account, 'count toward' its being art. This is obviously problematic.

Meskin himself suggests a possible line of response to the irrelevant properties objection. An '[a]ppeal to an INUS-condition', Meskin writes, 'is Gaut's best answer to the problem of irrelevant criteria'.²⁵ The notion of an 'INUS condition' (an 'Insufficient but Non-redundant part of an Unnecessary but Sufficient condition') was initially introduced by John L. Mackie in an attempt to characterize the causal relation.²⁶ Suppose an arsonist sets fire to a house. What caused the fire? Mackie's proposal was that what we generally pick out as causes are INUS conditions. The arsonist's striking of the match is an example. The striking alone is insufficient for the fire (since oxygen must also be present), but it is a non-redundant part (oxygen alone is insufficient for fires) of a condition that is unnecessary (a short-circuit might have started the fire), but sufficient for the fire.

Meskin's initial proposal is to introduce the idea of an INUS condition to Gaut's project, adding to (G1)–(G4) the further condition that:

[A] criterial property [should also] be an insufficient but non-redundant part of some set of sufficient but unnecessary conditions for the application of the concept.²⁷

Let us call Meskin's revised proposal the *INUS Cluster Account*. The additional requirement that each criterial property should be an INUS condition for art successfully avoids the irrelevant properties objection, since irrelevant properties are clearly *not* non-redundant; they make no difference to whether or not something is art. If we subtract an irrelevant property such as 'being made on a Thursday' from a set that is sufficient, the remaining set will continue to be sufficient. The additional non-redundancy requirement can also be expressed as follows: criterial properties should be part of at least one *minimally sufficient set*.

By *minimally sufficient set* S for some concept C, we mean a set S of properties whose possession by some individual x is sufficient for x to be C, but such that every proper *subset* of S is insufficient. If no *other* sufficient set of criterial properties holds, then x will not be a C once a property P is removed from a *minimally sufficient set*. In other words, every property P in a minimal sufficient set is *non-redundant*.

Despite having suggested this expanded form of the cluster account, Meskin adds that while the *INUS cluster account* is promising, it faces a number of difficulties for which 'there does not appear to be any quick fix'.²⁸ We agree that the account does face some difficulties, but we are confident that they can be solved fairly straightforwardly.

One preliminary problem, not mentioned by Meskin, is that the requirement that all criterial properties should be INUS conditions appears to be too restrictive. It does *not*

25 Meskin, 'The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered', p. 396.

26 John L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe* (Oxford: OUP, 1974).

27 Meskin, 'The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered', pp. 395–396.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 388.

seem necessary to insist, in general, that each criterial property be *insufficient* for membership of C. It would seem desirable that we leave open—at least in principle—the possibility that there might be *other* properties that *are* individually sufficient, even if one is able to find counterexamples to the individual sufficiency of each of the ten properties that Gaut lists. If one is concerned with providing an account of the *logical form*, rather than the *content* of the definition of art, it would seem sensible to drop the ‘I’ from ‘INUS’, and require only that each property be a non-redundant part of a sufficient condition (henceforth, a ‘NUS’ condition).²⁹

A second difficulty, also not discussed by Meskin, is that the requirement that criterial properties be (I)NUS conditions is in potential tension with (G3). According to (G3), *no* criterial property P should be individually necessary for something’s being art. But it may well be that some property P is a non-redundant part of *all* unnecessary but sufficient property sets, in which case P *would* be individually necessary (rather than merely non-redundant). We resolve this potential tension by rejecting (G3), because we wish to leave open the possibility that there might be *some* individually necessary properties. A commitment to anti-essentialism about art does not require that there be *no* necessary conditions. What makes a definition non-classical, we suggest, is not that there are no individually necessary properties, but that there is no set of properties whose members are individually necessary *and* jointly sufficient. This is perfectly compatible with there being *some* individually necessary conditions. Gaut himself admits that (G3) is not strictly true; he allows for one exception: being the product of an action *is* necessary for something to be an artwork.³⁰

Meskin worries that ‘traditional problems with the INUS account (for example, with overdetermination, pre-emption, and some types of spurious causes) . . . would have to be dealt with’ by the (I)NUS Cluster Account.³¹ But it is not clear to us that these issues have to be dealt with, given the obvious and significant differences between the relations of causation and constitution. For causation is generally taken to be a relation between events that stand in temporal (and perhaps nomic) relations to one another. The relation of constitution/definition, on the other hand, is concerned with relations between criterial properties. Given these differences, there is no *a priori* reason to expect that the failures of the INUS account of causation will immediately translate into failures of the (I)NUS cluster account of definitions. In the absence of any more detailed account of how the problems of overdetermination, pre-emption and spurious causation are supposed to affect the definitional case, we leave this issue aside.

29 Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe*, makes a similar point in his INUS analysis of causation. He states that causes are *at least* INUS conditions; they may be individually *sufficient* for their effects. Mackie adds that causes may also be NS conditions: non-redundant parts of a unique sufficient condition (a condition that is not unnecessary). But Gaut must reject the latter possibility, since a central commitment of the cluster account, as stated in (G2), is that there is *more than one* sufficient condition for something’s being art. So, while we may dispense with the ‘I’ in INUS, we should not dispense with the ‘U’. If there is only one sufficient condition, the cluster account collapses into a classical definition.

30 Gaut, “‘Art’ as a Cluster Concept”, p. 29.

31 Meskin, ‘The Cluster Account of Art Reconsidered’, p. 396.

Meskin has a further worry about the INUS cluster account, namely that '[a]ny necessary condition for the application of a property criterial for C (that is itself not necessary for C) will itself count as criterial for C'. For example, suppose that 'being an artefact that is the product of a high degree of skill' is criterial for something's being art. Then simply 'being an artefact' is also criterial, since being an artefact is a necessary condition for something's 'being an artefact that is a product of a high degree of skill'. It is not entirely clear to us why this is supposed to be problematic. Perhaps it seems intuitive to some that being an artefact does not contribute anything to (or 'count towards') being an artwork. This may seem reasonable if one is comparing two artefacts, one of which is judged to be art and the other not. We feel, however, that the non-redundancy of this property indicates that it is relevant to the definition of what art is, and that Gaut's notion of 'counting toward' has misleading connotations. In the next section, we replace 'counting toward' by 'constitutive for'; our intuition is that being an artefact is (metaphysically) constitutive for something's being art.

Lastly, Meskin does not believe that Gaut has established that if none of the ten criterial properties are individually necessary, then it follows that there can be no necessary conditions at all. There could be *other* necessary properties that are not part of the set of ten. If so, the conclusion that there are no individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for art is unsupported, and univocal classical definitions are not precluded. We do not need to discuss whether or not there are any such individually necessary properties, however. The disjunctive account we provide in the following section is *not* susceptible to Meskin's worry; our argument against classical definitions does not rest on the premise that there are *no* individually necessary properties. The non-classical nature of the definition is built in to the logical form we propose.³²

In conclusion, none of the difficulties raised for the (I)NUS account are especially worrisome. The idea that criterial properties are NUS conditions in non-classical definitions, together with the elimination of (G3), can be combined with Gaut's original proposal, achieving a drastic simplification of the logical form of the account by stripping it down to its essential core.

The Disjunctive Theory of Art

The suggestion that Gaut's account is equivalent to a disjunctive definition was made in passing, but not developed, by Stephen Davies and Robert Stecker.³³ Gaut himself occasionally speaks as if he believes that the cluster account is equivalent to some kind of disjunctive account.³⁴ As it turns out, these suggestions are incorrect. The cluster account

32 Meskin also points out that establishing the non-redundancy of any criterial property is a very difficult task. We agree that each claim of non-redundancy can only ever be established tentatively; new counterexamples may always be discovered. But the practical difficulties involved in establishing the non-redundancy of each criterion, as Meskin himself concedes, do not constitute an objection to the *form* of the (I)NUS cluster account. Rather, these worries concern the *content* of the account.

33 Davies, 'The Cluster Theory of Art'; Robert Stecker, 'Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?', in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 45–64.

34 Gaut, 'The Cluster Account of Art Defended', pp. 284–286.

as originally stated by Gaut is *not* equivalent to a disjunctive definition. On the other hand, a disjunctive definition can capture the aspects of the cluster account that we consider worth preserving. We propose replacing Gaut's notion of a cluster account by that of a disjunctive definition, and will show how the two accounts are logically related. Whereas Gaut thinks that a definition must comprise individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, we think that a definition must simply comprise constitutive conditions, whatever their logical form may be. We therefore agree with Davies that classical and disjunctive accounts of the constitutive conditions of art should both qualify as fully fledged definitions.

Let us say that

Concept C has a disjunctive definition just in case $C \leftrightarrow ((P \ \& \ Q \ \& \ R) \vee (Q \ \& \ R \ \& \ S \ \& \ T) \vee (Q \ \& \ W) \vee \dots)$

Each disjunct is a minimally sufficient set, namely a set whose members are non-redundant, and it is disjunctively necessary. Properties P, Q, . . . , W within each minimally sufficient set are (metaphysically) constitutive of what it is to be an instance of C, which legitimizes our calling this a species of the genus 'definition'. Note that we have indicated considerable overlap of constitutive properties in the different disjuncts: several properties are shared between disjuncts. Moreover, property Q is common to all three of the disjuncts shown. Many instances of C may instantiate most or all of the properties P, Q, . . . , W and most or all of the disjuncts.

We are now in a position to give a precise account of what it takes to be a metaphysically constitutive property for a concept C. Replacing the conjunction of terms conjoined with property P (that is Q & R) with X, and the formula representing the disjunction of all the other minimal sufficient conditions with Y, we propose the following account of a *constitutive property* for concept C, which replaces Gaut's notion of P's *counting toward C*.

P is a constitutive property for concept C iff for some X and for some Y, $((P \ \& \ X) \vee Y)$ is a necessary and sufficient condition for being an instance of C, where Y does not entail $(P \ \& \ X)$ and vice versa. Symbolically, in disjunctive normal form:
(CP) P is a constitutive property for C just in case $C \leftrightarrow ((P \ \& \ X) \vee Y)$

The caveat that Y should not entail $(P \ \& \ X)$ and vice versa is crucial for evading potential collapse into a classical definition. As long as $(P \ \& \ X)$ does not entail Y, and Y does not entail $(P \ \& \ X)$, there will not be a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for C. This is not to say that there are *no* necessary and sufficient conditions whatsoever for something being C. The disjunction $(P \ \& \ X) \vee Y$ is itself a necessary and sufficient condition. In this trivial sense, all definitions *can* be given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. What the supporter of classical definitions adds is that the necessary and sufficient condition is a conjunction of properties that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient. If anti-essentialism is interpreted as the claim that there is no condition necessary and sufficient for something to be art, as proposed for example by Davis, we are happy to call our disjunctive account *disjunctively essentialist*.³⁵

35 Davies, 'The Cluster Theory of Art'.

Some conjunction of properties may occupy the place of X, and a disjunction of conjunctions may occupy the place of Y. In special cases, X will be empty, and P will be sufficient for C. Y, on the other hand, cannot be empty if C is a disjunctive rather than a classical concept, although Y may represent only a single disjunct, or even just a single property. When the set Y is empty, the disjunctive definition collapses into a classical one ($C \leftrightarrow (P \& X)$, where X is a conjunction of properties). This is a positive feature of our account, because we want constitutive properties to be part of both disjunctive and classical definitions.

Now, is Gaut's original cluster account logically equivalent to our disjunctive definition? Not quite, but this is a good thing. What the disjunctive logical form $C \leftrightarrow ((P \& X) \vee Y)$ entails are only Gaut's conditions (G1), (G2) and (G4). These represent what we take to be the healthy (though slightly bloated) core of the cluster account. In addition, the logical form we propose circumvents the irrelevant properties objection.

Let us explore in more detail how our disjunctive definition and Gaut's cluster account are related, if not by logical equivalence. It follows from our definition of constitutive property that:

- (1) $(P \& X \& Y) \rightarrow C$
- (2) $((P \& X) \rightarrow C) \& (Y \rightarrow C)$
- (3) $C \rightarrow (P \vee X \vee Y)$
- (4) $((P \& X) \rightarrow C) \& ((\sim P \& X \& \sim Y) \rightarrow \sim C)$

(1) states that the constitutive properties are jointly sufficient for membership in class C, as required by (G1). (2) states that some proper subsets of constitutive properties are also sufficient, as required by (G2). In fact, (G1) follows from (G2), so (G1) is redundant. However, (G3) does *not* follow from our definition, since P might be part of Y, in which case P would be individually necessary, in violation of (G3). So the two accounts are not logically equivalent. This is not problematic for our purposes, since we have already rejected (G3). (3) states that at least one of the constitutive properties must be instantiated, as required by (G4). Finally, (4) states that P is a non-redundant part of $(P \& X)$; X alone, absent P and Y, entails $\sim C$.³⁶ This ensures that constitutive properties are non-redundant, blocking Meskin's irrelevant properties objection, which is instead fatal to Gaut.

The reason why cluster accounts in the style of Gaut are subject to the irrelevant properties objection is that (G4) is too weak. This point is absolutely crucial; it is the single most important element of our proposal. Rather than saying that the *properties* (P, X, Y) are disjunctively necessary for C, as in (G4) and (3) above, Gaut should have stated that the *disjuncts* $((P \& X), Y)$ are disjunctively necessary. That is,

$$(G4) C \rightarrow (P \vee X \vee Y)$$

should be replaced by

$$(G4^*) C \rightarrow ((P \& X) \vee Y).$$

Note that Meskin's INUS condition, (4), follows from (G4*) by *modus tollens*, in conjunction with (G2). (G2) and (G4*) together rule out irrelevant properties: an irrelevant

36 Notice that this is compatible with there being some K such that $K \& X$ is one of the disjuncts in Y.

property 'I' cannot be conjoined to (P & X), since (P & X & I) is not disjunctively necessary; nor can I be disjoined, since I is insufficient for C. In effect, Gaut's inclusion of (G4) rather than the stronger (G4*) leaves a small loophole in his account, which Meskin's irrelevant properties objection exploits.

Finally, (G1) and (G3) can be eliminated: (G1) because it follows from (G2), and (G3) because it is unnecessarily restrictive. This leaves

$$\begin{aligned} & (G2) ((P \& X) \rightarrow C) \& (Y \rightarrow C) \\ & (G4^*) C \rightarrow ((P \& X) \vee Y) \end{aligned}$$

to which the disjunctive biconditional $C \leftrightarrow ((P \& X) \vee Y)$ is logically equivalent.

To summarize, the disjunctive normal form is logically equivalent to a *strengthened* version of Gaut's cluster account. All the important features of the disjunctive logical form we propose can be captured in the very simple expression $C \leftrightarrow ((P \& X) \vee Y)$, which simultaneously replaces Gaut's four conditions *and* encompasses Meskin's suggested INUS modification.

We can then propose the following generalized (and simplified) account of disjunctive definitions:

(DD)* Concept C has disjunctive defining conditions just in case $C \leftrightarrow (Z \vee Y)$, where (i) Z and Y are either non-empty conjunctions (e.g. P & Q & R) or non-empty disjunctions of conjunctions (e.g. (Q & R & S & T) \vee (P & Q & W) \vee . . .);³⁷ (ii) Z does not entail Y and Y does not entail Z; (iii) Z does not entail C and Y does not entail C.

We have already discussed conditions (i) and (ii), so let us consider condition (iii). It needs to be added to avoid that C is a necessary condition for either Z or for Y. Without this stipulation, counterintuitive results may arise. For instance, the concept Male could be disjunctively defined with a long disjunction of types of male:

$$\text{Male} \leftrightarrow (\text{Bachelor} \vee \text{Husband} \vee \text{Father} \vee \text{Uncle} \vee \dots)$$

Each disjunct is minimally sufficient for Male. Absent (iii), it would be consistent with our account to say that being a bachelor is constitutive of what it is to be male, which is clearly counterintuitive. Intuitively, being male is constitutive of what it is to be a bachelor. The additional stipulation prevents this sort of problem from arising: being a bachelor would not qualify as part of a disjunctive definition of being a male, because being a male is necessary for being a bachelor.

One final ingredient should be added to our account. As it stands, the account need not entail any vagueness. If each disjunct is non-vague, their disjunction is also non-vague; a disjunction of precise concepts is itself precise. Like Gaut, we want to allow for the possibility of some indeterminacy over exactly which properties are included in each minimally sufficient set. Borderline cases will arise for sets of properties whose joint sufficiency for C is indeterminate.³⁸ Regions of conceptual vagueness, however, could, potentially, be

37 In special cases, the conjunctions may degenerate into individual properties which are sufficient for something's being art.

38 We side with non-epistemic theorists of vagueness with respect to the interpretation of the phenomenon of borderline cases. What underlies them is not ignorance but semantic indeterminacy.

bracketed between clearly insufficient and clearly sufficient conditions; the membership condition is not *completely* indeterminate.

We are now ready to state the *Disjunctive Theory of Art* (DTA), according to which art is a disjunctive concept with ‘blurred’ edges:

(DTA): $\exists Z \exists Y (\text{Art} \leftrightarrow (Z \vee Y))$, where (i) Z and Y are either non-empty conjunctions (e.g. P & Q & R) or non-empty disjunctions of conjunctions (e.g. (Q & R & S & T) \vee (P & Q & W) v. . .);³⁹ (ii) there is some indeterminacy over exactly which disjuncts are sufficient; (iii) Z does not entail Y and Y does not entail Z; (iv) Z does not entail Art and Y does not entail Art.

Z and Y, the individually sufficient and disjunctively necessary disjuncts, are to be formed from properties such as those on Gaut’s list of ten. What the appropriate minimally sufficient combinations of properties actually are (and whether Gaut’s ten properties are in fact the right ones) is, to repeat, not our concern in this paper; we are primarily interested in the logical form of the definition of art rather than the content. The instantiation of either disjunct (Z or Y) is sufficient for something’s being art, and if something is art, then (at least) one of the disjuncts must be instantiated. In other words, the disjuncts are individually sufficient and disjunctively necessary. In some cases, the combination of properties will lead to a borderline case, namely a case in which some object x instantiates a set of properties whose joint sufficiency is semantically indeterminate. Finally, we require that Z does not entail Y and Y does not entail Z, in order to render DTA incompatible with a classical definition, and that Z does not entail Art and Y does not entail Art, in order to exclude the possibility of disjunctively defining art via a long disjunction of types of art (what we are after are the conditions that are constitutive of what it is for something to be art of any type).

Why the Disjunctive Theory of Art?

A key advantage of the DTA over the CTA is that it can handle existing counterexamples to all rival classical theories with ease. For instance, while aesthetic theories of art fall to cases of anti-aesthetic art, aesthetic criteria may relate to only one disjunct in a long disjunction. Failure of anti-aesthetic art to qualify as art on aesthetic grounds does not rule out the possibility that it may qualify by instantiating some other minimally sufficient disjunct. Classical theories effectively put all of their eggs into one basket, and fall if the basket falls. The DTA, on the other hand, distributes the eggs into several baskets/disjuncts and is consequently far more robust.⁴⁰ Moreover, the DTA makes sense of the fact that rival classical definitions of art are all somewhat appealing: they are because they each focus on an actual subset of properties that are constitutive of something being art.

Our account is importantly different from other non-classical proposals. It is different from resemblance-to-paradigm accounts, which characterize artworks as forming

39 In special cases, the conjunctions may degenerate into individual properties which are sufficient.

40 See Gaut, ‘Art as a Cluster Concept’, for further discussion.

a family kept together by resemblance to paradigm instances. We agree with Carroll that this version of the family resemblance account 'is not a viable competitor for explaining how we sort art from non-art because using the family resemblance method there would be no sorting at all'.⁴¹ An 'alien carburetor', as Carroll points out, 'will resemble Rodin's *Gate of Hell* at least in respect to being a material object, as well as probably in a number of other ways'.⁴² Our account, on the other hand, comprises a specific, if tentative, set of constitutive properties, which provide a principled method for sorting. In this respect, it is similar to Gaut's cluster account, to which we are significantly indebted.

It should be pointed out that ours is certainly not the first disjunctive theory of art. Robert Stecker has argued that *any* successful definition of art will have to be disjunctive.⁴³ We are happy to think of our proposal as a rigorous formulation of what a disjunctive definition of art should look like. As it turns out, Stecker's own account is *not* an instance of DTA. The reason is that DTA entails vagueness, whereas Stecker's account explicitly denies it. As Stecker puts it, 'the conditions I state are asserted to be determinately sufficient' for something to be art.⁴⁴ We consider this to be a significant shortcoming of Stecker's disjunctive account.

Our own theory includes the proviso that 'there is some indeterminacy over exactly which disjuncts are sufficient'. In the absence of this proviso, disjunctive theories of art would not offer more resources than classical theories for explaining the existence of borderline cases, thereby losing what we take to be one of their distinctive advantages. Classical theories can generate vagueness in one of two ways: first, if the defining properties themselves are vague, and second, if there is some semantic indeterminacy over whether they are jointly sufficient. The latter type of vagueness has been termed *combinatory vagueness* by William Alston.⁴⁵

Suppose that there is a borderline case of art for which the conditions that constitute some candidate classical definition are not themselves vague, and further suppose that the sufficiency of their conjunction does not seem to be indeterminate (if, for example, other cases that instantiate the same conjunction of properties are *not* borderline). A disjunctive theory that can appeal to the indeterminate sufficiency of *other* disjuncts as an explanation of the borderline status of this case should be preferred to a candidate classical theory that cannot. For the same reason, it should be preferred to a candidate disjunctive theory such as Stecker's that does not allow for any indeterminacy in the sufficiency of conjunctions. We follow Gaut in thinking that accounting for borderline cases is a requirement for any good theory of art.

41 Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, p. 11.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Stecker, 'Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?'; Milton Snoeyenbos, 'On the Possibility of Theoretical Aesthetics', *Metaphilosophy* 91 (1978) pp. 108–121 also offers something along the lines of a disjunctive definition of art, but he insists that there can be no individually necessary properties. We have rejected this assumption.

44 Stecker, 'Is it Reasonable to Attempt to Define Art?', p. 48.

45 William P. Alston, 'Vagueness', in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 218–221.

Stecker's theory faces a further problem. According to Stecker, something is an artwork at a time t , just in case either it is in a central art form at t and it is intended to fulfil a properly specified function of that form, or it is an artifact that fulfils a properly specified function of art with excellence.⁴⁶

As Gaut notices, this is what we may call a 'simple disjunctive definition', characterized by a very low degree of pluralism.⁴⁷ It is low because there are only two disjuncts, and each of them is formed by a single functional property. According to our DTA, on the contrary, there are *several* heterogeneous properties that count towards whether or not something is an artwork. Each of these properties is part of a minimally sufficient condition and hence for each property, the possession or absence of that property can potentially make the difference between one object's being art and another's not. Additionally, there are *several minimally sufficient conditions*, as opposed to the only two sufficient conditions of Stecker's disjunctive definition. In summary, in contrast to Stecker's account, but in continuity with Gaut's cluster account, our own disjunctive account allows for borderline cases and it is highly pluralistic.

Finally, our DTA is superior to Jeffrey Dean's recent prototype theory of art.⁴⁸ Dean has argued that art cannot be classically defined because the mental representation of art may have, as suggested by some psychologists of concepts, the structure of a prototype. Generally speaking, prototype theories of concepts assert that we represent classes in long-term memory by storing a variety of statistical information about the class that the concept refers to.

Prototype theories typically give an account of the psychological process of categorization in terms of 'similarity' to the set of properties that constitute the prototype. A quantitative measure of similarity is calculated based on how many properties an individual shares with the prototype, with properties usually being weighted according to typicality.

The individual x is categorized as being a member of C if the similarity score exceeds some threshold value. In principle, there are several ways in which the threshold could be exceeded. That is, there are several combinations of properties whose instantiation is sufficient for an individual to be classed as a member of the category. As with the DTA, the fact that there is more than one combination of sufficient properties explains why no CTA has been (or could be) successful. Similarly, prototype theories can account for borderline cases if the similarity threshold is approached but not exceeded. Prototype theories are thus, it would seem, explanatory rivals to our disjunctive theory.

There are several problems with prototype theories, however. First, unlike our DTA, it is not clear that prototype theories are always intended to provide metaphysical defining conditions. They may only be intended to offer an epistemic means of categorization.⁴⁹ A

46 The definition also appears in danger of circularity, unless the concepts of 'artwork' (definiendum), 'art form' and 'function of art' (both parts of the definiens) can be independently defined. We will disregard this point in what follows.

47 Gaut, 'The Cluster Account of Art Defended',

48 Jeffrey Dean, 'The Nature of Concepts and the Definition of Art', *JAAC* 61 (2003), pp. 29–35.

49 For further discussion of this point, see Georges Rey, 'Concepts and Stereotypes', *Cognition* 15 (1983), pp. 237–262 and 'Concepts and Conceptions: A Reply to Smith, Medin and Rips', *Cognition* 19 (1985), pp. 297–303.

second difficulty is what Edouard Machery has called the ‘selection problem’.⁵⁰ It is clear, for example, that not all typical properties of a class should be used in categorization. Artworks typically have the property of having been created by an artist whose last name begins with a letter between A and Z, but such a property is clearly of no use in categorizing objects as artworks or non-artworks. What is lacking is some principled means of selecting those properties that are relevant to categorization, and are metaphysically constitutive of art, from the set of those that are typical of art.

A third difficulty concerns the specific form of Dean’s proposal. Dean endorses a similarity to prototype model for establishing membership in the category of artworks, but he also adds that whether or not the concept of art should be extended to apply to some candidate noncentral cases cannot be established by *rules*: ‘there is no rule or set of rules that determines these extensions’.⁵¹ Dean adds that ‘noncentral cases are not related to central cases in virtue of having certain shared features, plus or minus certain additional features’.⁵²

We find this proposal to have the same flaw of resemblance-to-paradigm accounts: it fails to explain how we separate art from non-art, leaving the sorting process wrapped into a metaphysical mystery. If non-central cases are *not* related to central cases in virtue of having certain shared features, as stated by Dean, we have no idea of how the sorting could possibly go. Dean suggests that we should decide on membership on a case-by-case basis, but does not provide us with any tools to make that decision.

In contrast, we have proposed a clear rule for determining membership of the art category. The rule takes a disjunctive form: a candidate non-central case of art will qualify as art if and only if it satisfies one of a disjunction of minimally sufficient conditions for art (tentatively) formed out of Gaut’s ten criterial properties. We have also added that in some cases the rule will fail to establish whether a candidate case is an artwork, delivering a borderline case verdict. But this is very different from saying that there are *no* rules governing category membership other than some indefinite notion of similarity to a prototype.

We conclude that prototype theories, and Dean’s theory in particular, do not offer a preferable alternative to our DTA.

Conclusion

The DTA simplifies the logical form of Gaut’s cluster account considerably, retaining all of its advantages and avoiding all current objections to it. Our core proposal is that art cannot be defined in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, but can be defined with a disjunction of minimally sufficient conditions. Our account is highly pluralistic, since there is a multiplicity of ways in which something can qualify as art. Given that we allow for a certain amount of indeterminacy over exactly which properties are comprised in each sufficient disjunct, the definition of art also allows for borderline cases. We have

50 Edouard Machery, *Doing Without Concepts* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), ch. 4.

51 Dean, ‘The Nature of Concepts and the Definition of Art’, p. 32.

52 *Ibid.*

argued that the DTA is able to evade counterexamples to classical, univocal theories of art, and is superior in other respects to resemblance-to-paradigm accounts, to prototype theories of art and to alternative disjunctive theories of art. Finally, we suggest that this approach may be of more general relevance in philosophical analysis. It may be the case that many concepts of philosophical interest, for which precise, univocal definitions have proved elusive, have disjunctive defining conditions and are semantically indeterminate to some extent. If so, attempts to provide classical definitions for such concepts are also doomed to failure.⁵³

Francis Longworth

Institut d'Histoire et de Philosophie des Sciences et des Techniques, Paris
francis.longworth@univ-paris1.fr

Andrea Scarantino

Georgia State University
ascarantino@gsu.edu

53 We would like to thank Matt Duncan, George Graham, Edouard Machery, Aaron Meskin, Dylan Murray and Eddy Nahmias for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.