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# Reply to Wilkinson

Anders Pettersson

In his book *Art as Performance* (2004) David Davies introduces what he calls a “pragmatic constraint” on our theories about the ontology of artworks. There are certain general requirements such theories should respect:

Artworks must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed “works” in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such “works” are or would be individuated, and that have the modal properties that are reasonably ascribed to “works,” in that practice.<sup>1</sup>

The gist of my concise criticism of Davies’ constraint in my book from 2017, *The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning*, was that his idea is quite conservative—not in a political sense, of course, but in an intellectual one. Existing ways of theoretical thinking are supposed to provide the framework within which to theorize about the ontology of the arts. The possibility that these current ways of thinking may be deeply flawed or otherwise unproductive is not being taken seriously by Davies.<sup>2</sup> I find it important to keep in mind, now as then, that our attempts to understand the realities around us have always been in transformation; Paul Thagard’s *Conceptual Revolutions* is one of my favorite illustrations of this. Where the arts are concerned, books like Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art* and Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Art Rethought* should remind us that our critical and appreciative practices are in constant change.<sup>3</sup>

It is now being argued that what I wrote does not do justice to Davies’ standpoints. In essence, three arguments for this are being put forward.

First, it is pointed out that Davies’ own proposed ontology of art is in fact strongly revisionary. “Given that Davies’ ontological proposal is often attacked for being implausibly revisionary, accusing his methodological principle of prohibiting revisionary ontologies is strange.” But what I was criticizing was Davies’ proposed pragmatic constraint. The fact that Davies himself does not respect it cannot in any way speak in its favor.

Second, Wilkinson observes that Davies is ready to consider modern, norm-breaking artworks. “The claim that the PC excludes contemporary artistic practice is thus unjustified.” But I made no such claim, and it is important to see that Davies’ suggested pragmatic constraint concerns our theorizing about art, not artistic practice as a whole. The criticism I did voice, in a footnote, was that analytic aestheticians tend to have a biased idea of current critical practice.

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1 David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 18.

2 Cf. Anders Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), 170-71.

3 Paul Thagard, *Conceptual Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Larry E. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

There is also a third objection: “Pettersson fails to acknowledge that the PC does not take the ontology of artworks to be *determined* by artistic practice, but instead makes the epistemic claim that artistic practice is the appropriate *evidence* to consult when doing ontology of art.” This remark surprises me, for I cannot really relate it to anything I wrote. Davies’ constraint is of course supposed to constrain our theorizing about the ontology of art, not, in itself, to determine the ontology of artworks. And it goes without saying that we will have to reflect on the phenomena we call artworks when theorizing about the ontology of art. (I would also like to underline, once again, that Davies’ pragmatic constraint concerns critical practice, not artistic practice as a whole.)

Wilkinson also refers to my own ideas about the ontology of literature. Let me say just a few words about these. In my view, talk in terms of literary works is often practical, but I find it advisable, when doing serious theorizing, not to count with the existence of literary works as separate, unitary entities. Then it is better just to reckon with text-and-meaning-ideas in authors and readers, and with physical copies, in some form, of what the author wrote down.

The brevity forced upon me by the format will have made my reply to Wilkinson sound a bit curt and ungenerous, and I regret that. I would gladly have added deeper reflections on what may explain our differences, and I am honestly grateful for Wilkinson’s positive interest in my book and for the opportunity to discuss Davies again.

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