

Book Reviews

Nigel Warburton, *The Art Question* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. xii, 147.

This is a short, admirably lucid, introduction to the philosophy of art centred around the question “What is Art?” Warburton follows tradition in understanding this Socratic question as a demand for the nature or essence of art; or, in modern analytic terms, the specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as a work of art. The book aims “to lay bare a range of indefensible positions, revealing the counter-arguments and counter-examples that undermine these positions” (p. 4). After a brief opening chapter on the relation of the art question to philosophy, Warburton discusses in successive chapters, the limitations and inadequacies of Clive Bell’s Theory of Significant Form, R.G. Collingwood’s Expressive Theory, the Family Resemblance Theory of Morris Weitz, and the Institutional Theory of George Dickie. The book ends by casting doubt on whether art has an essence at all, and so, on the whole project of pursuing the art question.

Despite the freshness and ease of the writing style, the approach is rather hackneyed. Although Warburton does a good job of summarizing the relevant theories, particularly Collingwood, the book cannot help but strike one as a rehearsal of all too familiar criticisms of an all too familiar project. Surely we know by now that essentialist definitions in any area of philosophy confront a dilemma: either they are trivial, or false. One horn is the danger of vicious circularity, defining the key concept narrowly in terms that simply presuppose it e.g. art – significant form – that which produces aesthetic emotion. The other horn is the threat of drawing the wrong boundary, say, by excluding genuine artworks and/or including within the category of art objects that it seems implausible to count as such. Unsurprisingly, Warburton’s critique takes the form of pinning his victims on one or other of these horns. So why ask “the art question”? One might be forgiven for thinking that Warburton thinks the search for a strict definition of art is the first, or perhaps the only, question that matters in reflecting upon art philosophically. But in the final chapter – aptly, but puzzlingly, titled “So What?” – Warburton shows his hand by concluding that the search for an all-encompassing definition of art is a waste of time. It is “probably not answerable” (p. 133) and “almost certainly a futile [pursuit]” (p. 126). Philosophers who engage in this fruitless quest are criticized for being more concerned for “crossword-puzzle-like technicalities” (p. 133) than the

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actual role of art in our lives. Then why on earth devote a book to it, even if it is only an introduction?

Warburton's only motivation for pursuing the art question is that it is "so puzzling" (p. 4). Really? He adds that "anxious objects" like Duchamp's Fountain or Warhol's Brillo Boxes obviously raise this question. Do they? I would have thought they raise a quite different question, namely, "Why is this object a work of art?" Given that this is precisely the sort of question that Warburton thinks ought to replace the art question (see ch.5), we are left without any interesting motivation for considering it at such length. A deeper question is why philosophers have wanted a definition of the essence of art. To his credit, Warburton does briefly take up this issue, offering three suggestions: 1) to help decide difficult cases; 2) to explain why something that is called art is art; and 3) to tell us which objects are likely to repay close attention. What goes missing here is that a definition alone could not possibly achieve any of these things without being applied in the right way and, in order that that be done, one must have, and be able to make sense of, one's experience of putative artworks. Here, I suggest, is the underlying motivation for the definition project: a definition seems to (but, of course, ultimately cannot) allow us to avoid responsibility for having to rely on, and articulate, our own experience of objects that we suppose are aspiring to the category of art. Experience is the indispensable basis of our reflections about art.

Ultimately Warburton enjoins us to do something this book only attempts in order to provide a few counter-examples: to "turn back" to consider particular real works of art, their local features and specific values. I was surprised to find Warburton eventually endorsing a neo-Wittgensteinian approach to aesthetics, revealing that, for all his criticisms, he is much closer to Weitz than any of the other thinkers he discusses. The only significant difference being that whereas Weitz regards the definition project as a logical mistake, Warburton sees it as simply unlikely to yield satisfying results. Given that, I found most of Warburton's criticisms of Weitz's idea that art might be accounted for by a family of overlapping resemblances disingenuous. The point of this Wittgensteinian idea is not simply to offer a way of thinking that does not require commitment to art's having an essence (in some philosophically loaded sense). It is also, and importantly, to challenge the explanatory project of essentialism, the idea that philosophy must explain in some entirely general way why anything that counts as art does so. Warburton criticizes Weitz for offering "no scheme for deciding what is to count as a relevant resemblance" (p. 81), hence what is to count as art, despite being well aware (see p. 122) that this approach rejects the view that it is the task of philosophy to provide any such general decision procedure.

As an exercise in philosophical analysis, it is salutary to run through the misguided attempts to define art. On that ground this book would be a valuable component in an introductory class on the philosophy of art – provided it was supplemented with additional reading materials pursuing other questions. Warburton's final image of essentialist thinking as a largely unilluminating project far removed from any genuine appreciation or engaged criticism of art, shows that the value of this book lies primarily in its valedictory character, a swan song for the art question within the philosophy of art.

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