

On What is “In” and What is “Imputed to” Objects of Interpretation

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My principal focus in this paper is on what might be called the metaphysics of interpretation. I am concerned with the kinds of objects towards which interpretation is appropriately directed and the kinds of properties that interpretation identifies. It might be thought at the outset that the enquiry is flawed because there is no single enterprise called interpretation and both the objects and properties involved are multifarious. In fact the varied nature of the objects of interpretation and correspondingly the varied forms that interpretation can take will be one of my central themes. Nevertheless, focusing on cultural artefacts in general and works of art in particular I think there is a legitimate question to be raised which I am inclined to put in a Kantian formulation, namely: how is interpretation possible?

To get an idea of what is at stake in that question and in the metaphysical enquiry that underlies it, let me start with a subsidiary question: What is the relation between the properties of an object and an interpretation of that object? It might seem natural to suppose that any genuine properties of an object are antecedent to any competent interpretation, indeed that the role of the latter is to disclose or bring to light the former. Interpretation, on this view, recovers such properties as are in an object but are not immediately apparent.^{1,2} Such a conception is motivated by a realist intuition: things are as they are independently of how they are thought to be. Interpretation aims at truth. A more radical supposition, however, is that at least some of an object's properties, in some cases, are *constituted* by interpretation—they come into being only through interpretation. On this view, interpretation is constructive, helping literally to create objects of interpretation.³ The motivating intuition here is anti-realist or constructivist. Must there be a conflict between these two intuitions?

A simple solution might be to postulate two species of interpretation, the truth-seeking kind that reveals hidden properties and is essentially a mode of exploration and discovery (call it revelatory interpretation) and the constructive kind that enlarges and offers new perspectives but strictly neither describes an antecedent reality nor aims at truth (call it creative interpretation).⁴ To the extent that these are distinct and recognizable species, they conform to different demands we make on interpretation. Sometimes we expect interpretation to tell us what an object is really like, to show us something we have missed about the object; at other times this enquiry can seem altogether too pedestrian for we expect an interpretation to be fresh, original, and imaginative, showing us not hidden facts but new possibilities. Interpretation in musical or dramatic performance provides obvious instances of the latter.

Unfortunately distinguishing these two species of interpretation in itself does little to illuminate the problem originally posed, which is a problem about an object's properties and where, as it were, those properties reside. While it might be true that some interpretation is revelatory and some creative, it is clear, for one thing, that not any creative interpretation is as good as any other. What constrains acceptable interpretations of any kind is surely nothing other than the properties of the object itself. And an object must have some properties in itself—some identity conditions—in order to be identifiable as an object of attention. We demand of creative interpretation not perhaps that it be true *of* the work but at least that it be true *to* it. Yet how are we to draw the distinction between what is revelatory and what is creative if we do not already know what properties truly belong to an object? It looks as if the realist intuition cannot simply be abandoned in favour of the anti-realist one, even in the most promising cases. But if the two species of interpretation are applicable to one and same object then merely drawing that distinction will not tell us any more about how properties relate to interpretations.

It seems to me that the distinction between the two kinds of interpretation, with their corresponding intuitions, already presupposes a distinction between different kinds of objects and even different kinds of properties. I want to sketch out a view about those objects and properties, one that I hope can reconcile tensions if not contradictions in our common suppositions about interpretation. I will defend—or at least adopt as a working constraint—the realist intuition about objects, that they are identifiable and possess intrinsic properties independently of interpretation (even if subject to interpretation). But I also will defend a moderate version of creative interpretation allowing that some properties of some kinds of objects are the product of, and are not antecedent to, interpretation.

A few more preliminaries about interpretation. The first is that different kinds of objects invite different kinds of interpretation. We should not assume in advance that every object of interpretation is subject to the same methods of interpretation: a poem, a dream, a distant energy surge in the universe, eccentric behaviour at a party, a cryptic remark, evidence at a murder scene, a Rorschach blot, a quattrocento painting, a Biblical passage, and a judgment of the Supreme Court, might all invite interpretation but the constraints on how an interpreter might proceed cannot be assumed to be the same in the different cases. Secondly, I am inclined to suppose, more controversially, that interpretation cannot proceed, certainly cannot be successful, without prior determination of the *kind of thing* being interpreted. Interpretation in that sense need not go all the way down but in most cases can only begin after a preliminary categorisation. Completely unfamiliar or unclassifiable objects are usually uninterpretable. Thirdly, it is important to retain some kind of distinction between interpretation and description. Interpretation arises only where an object's significance is unclear or not obvious, where there is a need to "make sense" of something.⁵ You don't need to interpret my greeting 'Good morning' unless you think it is something other than a greeting.

Let us now return to objects and their properties, beginning with, as it were, "ordinary" objects: plants, animals, planets, mountains. It is common to divide properties

of such objects into two broad classes: intrinsic and relational (or extrinsic). The terms are not clearly defined but the idea of the two classes is reasonably straightforward. Intrinsic properties are those that belong to the object per se, apart from the relations that it stands in with other objects. They are not context-sensitive; being “in” the object they persist from context to context. Some intrinsic properties are essential, without which the object would not be the object that it is, some are non-essential or contingent. Often the difference between essential and non-essential intrinsic properties is explicable in terms of determinable and determinate properties. Extended objects, like the ones mentioned, have spatial properties—size, shape, volume, and so forth—essentially but particular sizes, shapes or volumes only contingently. Properties of objects bearing on their microstructure and the nature of their constituent elements are also intrinsic and might themselves be essential or non-essential.

Relational or extrinsic properties, in contrast, can take different forms. They include simple relations with other objects: next to, bigger than, owned by, parent of. They also include intentional properties, deriving from the attitudes, desires, thoughts and fears they invoke in human beings: desirable, frightening, inspiring, dangerous. A subclass of intentional properties are aesthetic properties, which can be possessed by natural objects as well as artistic artefacts. Aesthetic properties also admit of a relational analysis, relating lower-level perceptual properties of objects and the responses of ideal or appropriate perceivers.⁶ In the case of ordinary or “natural” objects only a small, highly restricted, class of relational or extrinsic properties are essential and almost certainly no intentional or aesthetic properties. Kripke, famously, has claimed the necessity of origins for living things, although this might be seen as a consequence of the necessity of constitution, in this case genetic structure. Normally relations that objects stand in to other objects, including the responses they invoke in people, are merely contingent. The objects could retain their identity even if those relations do not hold.

The contrast with cultural objects (and works of art in particular) is striking and illuminating. With natural objects there seems little room for interpretation other than the strictly exploratory or scientific. The intrinsic properties of objects might be hard to discern and might at some level be theory-laden to a high degree but the thought that the properties themselves, as opposed to the characterisation of those properties, might be radically variable relative to human interpretive schemes or actually be constituted by interpretation, as claimed for cultural objects, has little intuitive appeal—except to the most extreme anti-realist. Works of art seem altogether more intimately related to interpretation. As cultural objects they have intentional and relational properties as part of their very core of being. At a fundamental level *how they are* is a function of *how they are thought to be*; without human attitudes, beliefs, desires, emotions or meanings, and in general states of mind that need to be represented, expressed, symbolized, or made sense of, there would be no works of art. Here then are a peculiar species of object wholly dependent on the practices from which they arise, the cultures which give them significance and the individuals for whom they are of interest and value.⁷ In this sense, they are *intrinsically* intentional and relational. On the

face of it, then, the distinction between intrinsic and relational properties, paradigmatically attributable to natural objects, cannot apply in any straightforward way to cultural objects.

I want to build on this distinction between natural objects and cultural objects, along with their characteristic properties, both sharpening the distinction and in other respects drawing the two sides together. To avoid further confusion over the use of the word 'object' in both contexts, I will talk of 'objects' on the one hand and 'works' on the other, with the focus on works of art, very broadly conceived, as paradigm instances of cultural objects. For every work there is necessarily a corresponding object, in a sense to be defined; the object constitutes the work but is not identical with it. Thus the statue—a work—is constituted by a piece of marble—an object—but is not identical with that piece of marble. They have different identity conditions. The piece of marble could exist without the statue existing and quite radical changes in the marble, through deterioration and restoration, do not necessarily result in changes in the statue. There could even be *essential* properties of the statue, including being a statue or being a representation of Marcus Aurelius, which are not essential properties of the marble. That very same piece of marble might not have been a representation at all.

So how should we distinguish object and work? I invest the term 'object' with very permissive ontological significance. In the art context, patches of paint, pieces of canvas, colour and line configurations, or pieces of marble are objects; so too are strings of sentences or texts; abstract entities also count as objects, including in the case of music sound-sequence types, of the kind characterised by Jerrold Levinson. I accept that sound-sequence types—as distinct from initiated types—are eternal, so on my view some objects, in this extended sense, are both abstract and eternal. Some objects are naturally occurring, wood, marble; some are human creations, plastic, colour mixes. By 'object', I have in mind something like Arthur Danto's 'mere real thing', although without the extra baggage that comes with his theory. I share with Danto the intuition that the existence of an object, in this sense, or a 'mere real thing', is never sufficient for the existence of a work. Works are underdetermined by their physical or structural properties, or, put more strongly, there are possible worlds where, for any given work in this world, a structurally isomorphic object (or type) exists that is not a work at all or not that work.

What about *works* themselves? Here I am thinking of paintings, etchings; musical works; sculptures; as well as literary, philosophical, or historical works. These are human creations; they depend on human intentions and cultural conditions. They are intentional objects not only because they owe their origins to intentional acts but also because their identity conditions, as I have said, are partly determined by how they are *taken* or *thought to be* by relevant cultural communities. They are essentially relational in the sense that they are essentially embedded in cultural practices. This has strong implications, not always noticed, for their survival conditions. They cease to exist when there is no longer the possibility of their eliciting the appropriate kinds of responses among suitably qualified respondents. When they cease to be identified as works, and cease to be understood, appreciated, and valued as works, they cease to exist as works. This has the surprising consequence that a work might no longer survive even though the object that constitutes the

work has survived. In principle, a painted canvas that once constituted a work of visual art (a painting) could exist even though the work, the painting itself, do longer exists because it has lost its cultural embedding. Similarly a written text could survive even though the literary work it once constituted has been lost.

Let us return to interpretation. I have said that works are underdetermined by their physical properties. Two indiscernible physical objects could constitute radically different kinds of works or perhaps no works at all. So merely confronting a physical object—say, a painted canvas, or a piece of marble—is not enough to ground an interpretation. Too many interpretations are compatible with the mere physical facts to make any meaningful interpretation possible. Only when we know that it is a *work*, indeed a work of a certain kind, do we know how to start the interpretive process. This inclines me to suppose that it is works not objects that are the bedrock of interpretation at least in standard cases. We mustn't be blinded here by the ease with which—given familiar cultural conditions—we are able to identify works as works. That should not lead us to suppose that the work simply *is* the object that we see. To recognize a work as a work—a painted canvas as a painting (i.e. an intentional object conforming to cultural practices)—presupposes a fairly complex cultural background. The only—rather special—sense in which interpretations apply directly to *objects* is the sense in which artists project an interpretation onto an object—perhaps a 'found object'—in order to render it into a work. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that Arthur Danto sees works as functions of interpretations on objects. But Danto's theory does not imply that the interpretations of appreciators are directed at objects rather than works. We have to know both that something is a work and broadly what kind of work it is to begin interpretation.

What about the tension we noticed earlier between the identity conditions of a work being sufficiently robust to provide a stable object of interpretation and the possibility that some properties of works are constituted by, not antecedent to, interpretations? This of course is an instance of the familiar hermeneutic circle. But in distinguishing objects and works we now have better resources for approaching the whole question of what properties belong to a work and what properties are imputed to it through interpretation. Because works are culturally embedded, dependent on and identifiable through cultural practices, they already have intentional and relational properties as part of their very nature (if it didn't sound so paradoxical we might insist, as hinted earlier, that such properties are *intrinsic* to works). Works are, as it were, inseparable from their cultural wrappings, so features of these 'wrappings' can be thought to 'belong to' the works themselves. Thus properties deriving from how works are taken or thought to be can be part of the identifying conditions of works. It is perhaps here that revelatory and creative interpretation come closest together, where the former discloses properties present in a work and the latter generates such properties.

But I don't want to give the impression of too sharp a line that clusters on the one side objects, intrinsic properties, revelatory interpretation and realist intuitions about truth, and on the other side works, intentional properties, creative interpretation and anti-realist

intuitions. The position is a bit more complicated and interesting than that. For one thing there is still room for realist intuitions in talking about works even if they need to be refocused. I have suggested that the identifying conditions of works rest essentially on how they are thought to be so the realist divide between what something is and what it is thought to be does not immediately apply. But once a work has been accepted as such within a relevant cultural practice a kind of realism about its properties is possible. Take Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*.⁸ It is part of my thesis that there is nothing intrinsic to the object aspects of the work, i.e. the physical marks, brush strokes and colour configurations, that determine that it a work at all or a work of a particular kind, far less a representation. That's the underdetermination point. But once categorised as a representation, within a recognizable tradition, then certain basic facts about its depictive qualities are assumed; trivially that it depicts people round a table, for example. Such a fact must be a starting point for interpretation not a product of interpretation. Even further along this line, just because certain properties of works are not obvious to any but the suitably informed does not ipso facto imply they are matters of dispute or subject to mere hypothesis rather than truth or that they are not, in the relevant sense, objectively present as characterising features of the work. An example might be the complex iconography in Western medieval painting. The depiction of saints or allusions to Biblical events or other kinds of symbolism are matters of objective fact, given well-established cultural conventions, even if accessible only through interpretation. This, of course, is revelatory, not creative, interpretation. It seems plain that we can retain certain realist intuitions even when talking of works.

However, the anti-realist intuition that interpretation *imputes* properties, thereby helping to construct works, is of fundamental importance in thinking about works, even if it has little or no role in thinking about objects. Creative interpretation is rooted in artistic practice. First, for example, it is through a species of creative interpretation that an artist endows otherwise inert matter—paint, marble, words, sounds—with intentional properties and thus transforms objects into works. This is the basis for Danto's notion of the transformative power of interpretation, which I alluded to earlier: "Indiscernible objects become quite different and distinct works of art by dint of distinct and different interpretations, so I shall think of interpretations as functions which transform material objects into works of art."⁹

But we can go further, for creative interpretation is not restricted to artists. Critics too can have a transformative role in the appreciation of art; like artists, they too must employ the imagination in their response to art. Creative interpretation must supplement the revelatory kind. It is in the nature of the practice of art that appreciators engage imaginatively with works, projecting fruitful ways they might be seen or heard or read or performed. This is creative interpretation for it is constrained not by truth but by imaginativeness and possibility. The best creative interpretations are those that take the established aspects of works, those elements intrinsic to the works, and find new saliences for them,¹⁰ or new ways of thinking about the work's themes, motifs, or symbolic or figurative aspects.

Does this activity genuinely add to the work or just play games with it? One reason for thinking it does expand the very conception of the work is that works, as intentional objects, bear with them the critical tradition that develops round them. This is partly a consequence of the practice of art, which invites critical engagement, but is also partly connected to the intentional nature of art, whereby, as we have seen, what they are is a function of what they are thought to be. Of course not any creative interpretation establishes a critical tradition. Only the best, most exciting, imaginative, or illuminating do so. But these imputations enlarge a work, they show ways in which indeterminacies can be filled out, they change the way a work is conceived and if they become canonical there is no going back; the work grows into this new conception. What begins as a mere possibility develops into a realisation and this becomes another route from “imputed to” to “in” or “part of”.

We have travelled a winding path from our original conundrum about interpretation and the properties of works. But I have left room, I hope, for the insights behind the two apparently irreconcilable positions: that of the realists, who hold that interpretation can only reveal pre-existent properties of works, and that of the constructivists, who hold that interpretations can help construct works. I have wanted to preserve a fairly robust realist notion of works, whose very nature can, I hope without undue paradox, incorporate intentional and relational properties. But in stressing the practice-dependence and intentionality of works, I have also shown them to be crucially different from ordinary objects such that many common assumptions about realism do not apply. It is part of the practice involving these strange objects that in opening up a field of possibilities, and inviting imaginative supplementation and the active search for new saliences and creative readings, there is scope in interpretation for work enlargement and creative imputation, as well as the revelation of what already exists.

Notes and References

¹ A clear defence of such a view is found in Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); and “The Constructivist’s Dilemma,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55:1 (Winter), pp. 43-52; it is also defended in different chapters in Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

² The view is presented in Joseph Margolis, “Reinterpreting Interpretation,” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, edited by John W Bender & H Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 454-70; and in *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999); Michael Krausz defends a similar view in *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

³ Some such distinction is acknowledged in Jerrold Levinson: “Two Notions of Interpretation,” in *Interpretation and Its Boundaries*, edited by Arto Haapala & Ossi Naukkarinen (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999): 2-21; in Eddy Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Penn State University-Press, 1997), p. 117; and in Peter Jones, *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁴ The point is rightly emphasized by Annette Barnes, *On Interpretation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, p. 26.

⁵ As John Bender puts it (about works of art, although the view is generalisable): 'a work's having an aesthetic property, F, such as grace, power, or starkness, is for it to have some set of (other) features and relations which makes the work evoke in some relevant class of perceivers or critics certain responses and judgments, including the judgment that it is appropriate to call the work F': John W. Bender, "Realism, Supervenience, and Irresolvable Aesthetic Disputes", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54 (1996), p. 371.

⁶ For more details, see my 'Work and Object', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. CII, pt. 2 (2002), pp. 141-162.

⁷This is an example discussed in Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices*.

⁸A. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.39.

⁹The idea of interpretation as the assignment of saliences is developed by Michael Krausz in *Rightness and Reason: Interpretation in Cultural Practices*.

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