

The Ontology of Art: Keeping it Easy, and Keeping it Real

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Amie L. Thomasson
Dartmouth College

The ontology of art addresses questions about what ‘sorts of things’ paintings, symphonies and so on are. Are symphonies eternal abstracta, or must they be created to exist? Are paintings physical objects or are they types of action, or individual performances? Centrally, addressing these questions requires answering various modal questions about the conditions under which works of art of various sorts would exist, persist, be identical or distinct.

Work in the ontology of art has provided a rich area of discussion over the last two decades. That very richness, however, has led to a proliferation of competing views, without any clear agreement about how to go about resolving the endless debates. If we hope to make good decisions about which view(s) to accept, it seems advisable to first ask how these decisions should be made. As a result, debates in the ontology of art, as elsewhere in ontology, have turned metaontological.

Within methodological debates in the ontology of art, a core point of dispute turns on how much weight we should give to a view’s coherence with elements of our ordinary beliefs and practices regarding works of art, and how much weight we should give to its coherence with ‘general metaphysical principles’ and to demands for parsimony, metaphysical ‘explanatory power’, and the like. The central division in the metaontology of art has come to be between the so-called ‘discovery’ model, and the so-called ‘descriptive’ model. Roughly, the discovery model holds that facts about the ontology of art are features of our world discoverable much as scientific facts are discoverable, in such a way that these discoveries could potentially overturn any of our common sense beliefs—including beliefs that works of music must be created, that paintings can be hung on the wall, or even that there *are* works of art.¹ As Julian Dodd puts it “In an analogous way to that in which scientists’ empirical investigations have overturned folk beliefs about the physical world, so philosophers’ metaphysical investigations might reveal us to be plain mistaken about the ontological nature of works of music, novels, or paintings” (2015, 76).

I have long been a critic of the discovery model. In opposition to the discovery model, I have defended what has come to be called, in this literature, the

¹ Tacit or explicit defenders of the discovery model include Greg Currie in *An Ontology of Art* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), and Julian Dodd, in “Adventures in the Metaontology of Art: Local Descriptivism, Artefacts and Dreamcatchers”, (*Philosophical Studies* 165 (2013): 1047-68), and in his “Defending the Discovery Model in the Ontology of Art: A Reply to Amie Thomasson on the *Qua* Problem”, (in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 75-95).

'descriptive' model.² The descriptivist view, roughly, is that the proper way of answering ontological questions must take off from analyzing the conception built into our art-related practices, in such a way that we can't all turn out to be massively wrong.³ On this view, claims that paintings are not things that can be hung on walls (Davies 2004) cannot be seen as potential 'discoveries' of a deep ontological truth. (Nonetheless, they can be seen as engaging in a form of metalinguistic negotiation—using the terms as a way of pressing for revisions in the way we use the relevant terms and treat engage in the relevant practices—I return to this idea in Section 5 below).⁴

The so-called 'descriptivist' approach for doing the ontology of art is, in my way of developing it, merely one application of the globally deflationary 'Easy Approach to Ontology' that I develop and argue for elsewhere (2015). On that model, roughly, questions about what exists (questions asked in what Carnap would have called the 'internal' mode, simply employing our extant terms or conceptual scheme) may be addressed by determining through a form of conceptual analysis what the application conditions are for the relevant terms, and then seeing whether these are fulfilled. Metaphysical modal claims, for example, about the conditions under which objects of a certain sort are identical or would persist, are seen as object-language expressions of rules of use for the terms (or what follows from these, sometimes as combined with empirical facts).⁵ Accordingly, conceptual analysis also plays a central role in determining what the most basic modal features are for the referents (if any) of our sortal terms. There is not space to argue for that approach here, though I have done so in detail elsewhere.⁶

² The term 'descriptivism' is not mine. This approach to the ontology of art is, in fact, just one application of the overall approach to ontology that I have developed extensively elsewhere (2007, 2015), which I have called the "easy approach to ontology". For purposes of this paper, however, I will stick with the nomenclature that has become commonplace in the philosophy of art literature and refer to this as the 'descriptivist' position, although it is a term that can lead us astray—for example in assimilating this view too closely with traditional descriptive theories of reference. See below.

³ I defend this methodological approach in "The Ontology of Art", in Peter Kivy, ed. *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 78-92, in "Debates about the Ontology of Art: What are we doing here?", in *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), and (beyond the case of ontology of art) in *Ordinary Objects*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Ontology made Easy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Others who are at least sympathizers with some form of descriptivism for ontology of art include Andrew Kania, David Davies, Sherri Irvin, Jerrold Levinson, and Guy Rohrbaugh. But descriptivists vary in many ways. Here it is mainly my own form of descriptivism that I shall have in mind and aim to explain and defend. Some descriptivists think of the methodology as applying only to work in the ontology of art, given the status of works of art as cultural or mind-dependent entities, (See Andrew Kania "The Methodology of Musical Ontology: Descriptivism and its Implications", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 426-44). I, however, argue that it applies across the board for matters ontological (2007, 2015).

⁴ For more on this last point, seeing certain work in this area as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation, see my (2016).

⁵ See my (2013) for a development and defense of the modal view. A fuller development and defense is in preparation, as *Norms and Necessity*.

⁶ For the general argument see my (2007a) and (2015); for particular applications to the ontology of art see my (2004), (2005), (2006) and (2010).

The descriptivist view has recently come under criticism within the ontology of art literature. First, Julian Dodd (2012) has argued that my initial arguments in favor of adopting a descriptivist methodology—arguments based on the *qua* problem—do not go through, as Gareth Evans provides a preferable solution to the *qua* problem that leaves the discovery model intact. Secondly, various people, prominently including Andrew Kania (2008) and Guy Rohrbaugh (2012), have voiced concerns that adopting the descriptivist methodology will ultimately lead us to eliminativism or fictionalism about works of art—and thus to much *more* revisionary conclusions than those that the descriptivist rejects. Finally, others urge that the descriptivist can't make sense of what is going on in revisionary views in the ontology of art, nor allow room for needed revisions.

As I will argue below, however, those criticisms can be seen as misplaced once a broader understanding of my metaontological approach is in place. I will begin with a brief overview of the arguments for the 'descriptive' approach and then turn to examine Dodd's criticisms of them. Thereafter, I will turn to examine arguments that descriptivism may lead us to a form of eliminativism or fictionalism. I aim to show that my earlier arguments for descriptivism survive the fire, and that (properly understood) descriptivism gives us reason for *rejecting* revisionary views about *whether* works of art exist, just as much as it gives us reason for rejecting revisionary views about *what* works of art are. And so, we can both keep the ontology of art easy, and keep it real. Finally, I will argue that adopting a descriptive, or more broadly deflationary approach to the ontology of art does not leave us unable to be revisionary. Instead, it gives a different *interpretation* of what such proposals for revisions can amount to, and what could *justify* them. I close with some reflections on what interesting and important work remains to be done in the ontology of art, even if one adopts the descriptivist approach.

1. Reasons for Descriptivism

The initial argument I gave in favor of a descriptivist approach to work in the ontology of art (2004) came from issues in the theory of reference.⁷ This is not my only argument in favor of a descriptivist approach to the ontology of art—or in favor of an across-the-board easy approach to ontology. Later, I have come to emphasize the important advantages to be gained in avoiding the 'discovery' model, for example in terms of avoiding the formidable epistemological and methodological mysteries it brings (2015)—mysteries about how we could be thought to 'discover' these ontological (often modal) facts.⁸ But I will leave those to the side here. For Dodd (2012) focuses on attempting to undermine my initial argument for the 'descriptive' approach by reexamining issues in the theory of reference.

The discovery model is often justified by appeal to a kind of pure causal theory of reference—suggesting that just as we could all 'turn out to be' wrong in thinking that whales were fish (they 'turn out to be' mammals), so we could all turn out to be wrong in our commonsense beliefs, say, that works of music are created.

⁷ A fuller, generalized development of this argument is in my (2007), 38-53.

⁸ For an overview of some of the arguments that can be given in favor of the easy approach, see my (2015: 318-330).

For (on this model) reference is not determined by ‘fit’ between descriptions speakers associate with a term and candidate referents, but rather by a causal-historical relation to items in a sample.

But, as I argued (2007a), purely causal theories of reference are beset by two sides of a *qua* problem:

1. Causal relations alone cannot determine *whether* or not our term refers (or if the attempted grounding fails), since we are always causally in contact with something. But causal theorists do accept that some terms fail to refer. I argue that to overcome this problem we need to accept that our terms have some basic level conceptual content in the form of application conditions: conditions that must be satisfied in the world for the term to successfully refer at all.
2. Causal relations alone cannot distinguish *which* of various potential referents the term is to refer to—since we will be in causal contact with a great many things (say, a statue, a lump of clay, a mereological sum of clay particles...) To disambiguate, I argue, we need more basic level conceptual content in the form of co-application conditions that specify under what conditions we may use the term again to refer to *the same F*.⁹

Accepting that our sortal terms come with these two sorts of conditions is what leads to (my version of) a descriptivist methodology for ontology. For the application conditions establish the most basic, conceptually relevant, existence conditions for things of the kind. As a result, we can answer existence questions straightforwardly: if the application conditions for a well-formed kind term ‘K’ are fulfilled, then there are Ks (see my 2015, Chapter 2). The coapplication conditions establish the most basic (conceptually relevant) identity and persistence conditions for things of the kind. So, basic modal questions about members of the kind (whether they have to be created, could survive restoration of various kinds, etc.) are answerable by reflecting on the relevant rules of use for the term (while descending to the object language).¹⁰ And this is why we can and should (as the descriptivist says) answer questions about the existence, identity, and persistence conditions of works of art first and foremost by a form of conceptual analysis.¹¹

2. Keeping the Ontology of Art Easy: Response to Dodd

Julian Dodd, however, argues that we needn’t and shouldn’t accept this solution to the *qua* problem, since another solution is available—indeed (he thinks) a preferable one, which leaves the ‘discovery’ model of ontological inquiry fully

⁹ Of course, many objections have been raised to the view that our terms have such conceptual content. I refer interested readers to my (2007a) for further discussion of various objections, with replies.

¹⁰ The modal view is developed in my (2007b and 2013). A book-length defense is in preparation.

¹¹ That is, as long as they are taken as ‘internal’ questions. Those that have the character of ‘external’ questions are discussed below. This approach leaves open questions about what form the conceptual analysis should take, and by what methods it is to be conducted.

intact.¹² That solution is supposed to come from Gareth Evans' view that the relevant necessary condition for something's being the intended referent of a use of a name is that it is *the dominant causal source of the body of information associated with that name*—not the thing that best fits that body of information.¹³

But this response is odd in two ways. First, it seems to misinterpret my view. Dodd interprets my view as a (tempered) version of an old-school descriptive theory of reference. Accordingly, he takes me to hold that the ontological conception (embedded in the application and co-application conditions that form the basic conceptual content of the term) provides a sort of 'template' that the referent must 'fit'. He writes of my view:

The tacit ontological conception of Fs shared by the term's grounders is thus taken to determine reference by serving as a kind of 'template': something that determines the reference of 'F' by laying down a condition that entities must satisfy, if the term is to apply to them" (2012, 82)

And again:

either the things picked out by 'F' have the existence conditions and identity conditions our tacit ontological conception presents them as having, or else, if nothing satisfies this conceptual template, 'F' fails to refer" (2012, 83)

But my view is not properly thought of as a 'fit' view. Adherents of the old-school descriptive theory of reference are thought to have held that whoever best fits the description associated with a name is its referent—where that description may include any kind of associated feature. But the features I am concerned with are not just any aspects of an associated description—it is merely the *ontological* features that are at stake. And the picture I have developed is *not* that the conceptual content *describes* certain modal properties that a thing must '*fit*' to count as the referent. Nor do I suggest that we must look into the world to see what (of various potential referents) has the most of these modal properties, where the one that 'fits' best is the true referent. Instead, the idea is that talk of modal features of objects is characteristically a way of conveying the constitutive semantic rules for our terms, while using object-language indicatives.¹⁴ Talk of what (metaphysical) modal features things have, on my view, is not a matter of *describing* a cluster of properties and finding the entity that has (most of) them. Instead, it is a way of expressing norms of use for the relevant terms while nonetheless *using* those terms, in the object-language. On my view, these norms *establish* the modal features that the things (if any) of the kind can be truly said to have. (The fact that this is not a 'fit' view will also become relevant later, in understanding why the supposed threats of eliminativism and fictionalism are misplaced.)

¹² Dodd "Defending the Discovery Model" (2012).

¹³ Gareth Evans "The Causal Theory of Names", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary Volume 47 (1973): 187-225, at 198.

¹⁴ See my "Modal Normativism and the Methods of Metaphysics", *Philosophical Topics* 35 (2007): 135-60, and "2012 Nancy D. Simco Lecture: Norms and Necessity", *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2013): 143-60, and (in progress). As I discuss in section 5 below, talk of modal features of objects may also be a way, not of communicating those rules the speaker thinks there *are*, but of advocating for those rules she thinks there *ought to be*.

The second thing that is odd about Dodd's idea that Evans provides an alternative and preferable solution to the *qua* problem is that Evans' suggestion was not designed to be a solution to the *qua* problem, and could not succeed as a solution to the problem at issue here. Evans aims disambiguate which of, say, two people a name refers to. For example, suppose that scholars discover a scroll with mathematical proofs, inscribed with the name 'Ibn Khan'—and take that to be the name of the mathematician (though it was actually the name of the later scribe): does the name (in their mouths) refer to the scribe or the mathematician?¹⁵ (Evans says the mathematician). Here, we can make sense of distinguishing which person is the 'dominant' causal source of the associated information.

But if we are asking whether our musical work terms (say) refer to pure structures, indicated structures, abstract artifacts, etc., the candidate referents differ only in their *modal* properties, not their empirical and causal properties—they are not separate sources of causal information. Suppose we ask whether an indicated structure or a platonic abstractum or an abstract artifact is the 'dominant causal source of our information' about *The Moonlight Sonata*. Even if we put aside issues about whether abstracta can be causally relevant at all, there seems no prospect for identifying which of these entities (distinguished only by their modal properties) is the causally dominant source of information. Similarly, there seems no prospect of distinguishing, say, whether the statue or the lump or the mereological sum is the dominant causal source of information associated with a given name—for the statue and lump apparently share their causal powers. (Indeed, their causal equivalence is the basis for well-known eliminativist arguments.)¹⁶

Dodd does notice this problem. His response is to say that Evans allows that "what counts as the dominant source of a person's body of information is determined not merely by what kind of thing is responsible for the majority of the information possessed, but also by factors such as 'the believer's reasons for being interested in the items at all'".¹⁷ Evans, for example, discusses a case in which archeologists find a tomb in the desert, and think it is the burial place of a figure from the Bible. They go on to acquire a lot more information about the man in the tomb (so that he is the dominant source of information). But still, "given the nature and point of their enterprise, the archaeologists are using the name deferentially to the authors of the Bible".¹⁸ But notice that for Evans this is *not* in the service of saying that our interests can help determine what counts as the dominant source of information, but rather of saying that sometimes our interests in using the term deferentially may *override* the principle that the referent of a name is the dominant causal source of information.¹⁹

Dodd interprets Evans differently, saying, "Given the kinds of creatures we are and the kinds of interest we have, objects of a certain kind will, so to speak, leap out at us from a sample and attract our interest more readily than others; and it is

¹⁵ Evans "The Causal Theory of Names", 203.

¹⁶ See, for example, Merricks (2001).

¹⁷ Dodd "Defending the Discovery Model", 93.

¹⁸ Evans "The Causal Theory of Names, 205.

¹⁹ Ibid, 205-7.

items of this more salient kind that will tend to be the dominant source of the information associated with a term when its reference is being grounded".²⁰ But putting aside the question of whether this is Evans' point, it doesn't solve the problem. In the cases Evans discusses, we can at least (among the potential referents) distinguish two *different* causal sources of information (two different people). But where debates about the ontology of art are concerned, as I argued above, there is no prospect of say, the statue but not the lump, or the pure structure but not the indicated structure *being* the dominant causal source of information.

Dodd might respond that the statue and lump *may be* causally distinct sources of information—for if, after a crushing, the lump survives when the statue does not, it may be a source of (ongoing) information that the statue can't provide (as it no longer exists). Nonetheless, for any time at which the two overlap, there will simply be no answer to the question of which entity—the statue or the lump, or something of else merely modally different—is *the* dominant causal source of information. As a result, there is no prospect of appealing to Evans' criterion to determine which is the 'real' referent. *Pace* Dodd, Evans' remarks do not enable us to solve the *qua* problem in a way that would preserve the idea that we could turn out to be totally wrong about matters ontological and modal.

Could one give up the idea that identifying the dominant source of information will resolve the *qua* problem, and instead appeal to Dodd's idea of salience—the thought that one entity but not the other may 'leap out at us and attract our attention'? Dodd might try to say: it is just *salient* for creatures like us, given our interests, to pick out the statue and not the lump or the mereological sum; or to pick out the pure structure and not the indicated structure.

But I think we have to tread carefully here. The idea of salience comes from perceptual fields, where we might take the giant clock on the train station's wall to be a more salient meeting place than the small coffee stain on the floor. There is, however, no difference in perceptible properties between the statue and lump, or between the pure structure and indicated structure, or other entities that differ merely in their 'ontological' features. So, it isn't not clear how we can understand this appeal to salience—to one object (the statue but not the lump; the pure structure but not the indicated structure) 'leaping out' and 'attracting our attention'—in any way other than as metaphorical.

Should we then place the focus on our *interests* as determining which we refer to? Perhaps we should: then we might say that it is *in virtue of our interests* that our term refers to the statue, or to the pure structure. How do we come to discover our interests, though? Presumably by appealing to a careful study of our practices: to what we care about when we use the relevant term. Do we care about tracking preservation of form? Do we care about connection to origin?... But this brings us back to the descriptivist camp—thinking that the best way of telling what ontological and modal features the referents of our art-kind terms (and names of works of art) have is to study the practices we are engaged in—which can't turn out to be massively 'wrong', as they in some way help determine what (ontological) sort of thing we refer to, if we succeed in referring at all.

²⁰ Dodd "Defending the Discovery Model", 93.

In short, there may indeed be a prospect of sorting out, by appeal to our interests, whether we are referring to the lump or the statue, the pure structure or indicated structure. But here the appeal to our interests (as I would say, reflected in our practices and in the rules of use for the terms we introduce) must carry *all the work*—and the causal story none. If we develop it in this way and account for what narrows down reference by appealing to practical interests and ways these influence our linguistic and other practices, the view begins to look rather like mine.

Dodd had promised to undermine my arguments for the descriptivist approach by showing that there is an alternative solution to the *qua* problem which leaves the ‘discovery’ model intact. But once we analyze it more closely, it seems that Dodd has misunderstood my view (taking it as a ‘fit’ view), and has not presented us with a workable alternative solution to the *qua* problem. If we take seriously the appeal to the ‘dominant *causal* source of information’ the account doesn’t get off the ground as a solution to the *qua* problem. If we appeal instead to our interests, the account begins to look like mine. Without giving an alternative response to the *qua* problem, Dodd hasn’t undermined the initial argument I gave in support of a descriptive approach to the ontology of art.

3. Keeping it Real: Avoiding Eliminativism?

I have argued above that the original argument I gave in favor a descriptivist approach remain intact, despite Dodd’s criticisms. Nonetheless, other objections have been raised against the descriptive approach, not by way of attempting to undermine the justifications *for* it, but rather by arguing that it may lead to objectionable consequences. In particular, Andrew Kania (2008) and Guy Rohrbaugh (2012) have argued that the approach may lead to eliminativism or fictionalism about works of art.

As Andrew Kania writes:

...Thomasson argues that if we refer with art-kind terms at all, it is to things with the basic ontological properties that we conceive those kinds as possessing. A problem arises if there are no such things, though. In that case, Thomasson claims that we refer to the closest ontological competitor. However, if we fail to refer to what we thought we referred to with some art-kind term, it is not clear that we must be referring instead to the closest competitor to the ontological conception implicit in our practice; we might simply fail to refer. Furthermore, if we *do* refer to some closest competitor, it seems likely that in our attempts to find that competitor we will be led away from descriptivism to the kind of revisionism we would like to avoid.²¹

But I nowhere suggest that if there are no such things ‘we refer to the closest ontological competitor’. Moreover, on my view there is no real prospect that there ‘turn out to be’ no things ‘with the basic ontological properties’ we conceive of our art kinds as having. For, as noted above, I do not hold a ‘fit to a template’ view. Instead, what determines whether or not there are entities of a given kind is whether the application conditions for the term are fulfilled. Application conditions, however, do not include modal/ontological criteria like there being something with

²¹ “Methodology of Musical Ontology”, 439.

the right modal properties, and can't include 'ontological' conditions like 'there must really be some object'.²² Under what conditions might the application conditions for 'painting' to fail—so that there are 'no such things'? Perhaps they would fail, in a particular instance, if we were confused, and what we took to be a painting was a projection. Or perhaps an attempted application would fail if what we pointed to was just a mess a child accidentally spilled on the floor. But while we might be able to see how the term could fail in particular cases, it is much harder to see how it could 'turn out' that the application conditions for 'painting' were *never* fulfilled. Barring massive conspiracy theories, we have no reason to deny that the application conditions associated with our standard art-kind terms are fulfilled, and so have no grounds for accepting eliminativism.

There are, however, arguments of a different sort for thinking that a descriptivist might end up having to be eliminativist. That is, as it is often put, suppose that application or co-application the conditions for the relevant terms turn out to be (perhaps covertly) contradictory. In that case, there can be nothing answering to them, and so the descriptivist would have to deny the existence of things of the relevant art kinds. Kania, for example, suggests that our artistic practices often seem to point to contradictory conceptions of works of art.²³ Ross Cameron argues that there is a contradiction inherent in holding that musical works are abstract, and that they are created, and that abstracta cannot be created²⁴ and uses that to argue that there are no entities that are musical works—though all we wanted to say 'about them' (including 'there are musical works') can be made true by other features of the world (say, a composer indicating a sound structure).²⁵ It is difficult, however, to render this alleged contradiction in terms of a conflict in our application and coapplication conditions. The createdness requirement *can* be seen as figuring in the application and coapplication conditions. For it is plausible that the term 'musical work' can only apply if there is a proper act of creation, and it is plausible that a musical work name can't be co-applied to anything that doesn't derive from the same act of creation. But what about the requirement of abstractness? The sense in which some think this conflicts with the creatability requirement is the traditional philosophical sense in which abstract entities are thought to be eternal, changeless, independent, and modally rigid entities. But there doesn't seem to be any reason to think that those criteria are built into the application and/or co-application conditions for our ordinary terms for works of music. They seem instead to arise from the impoverishment of our traditional philosophical conceptual system. But this should not incline us to toss out the concept of musical work or to conclude that it can't refer. What's called for instead is conceptual engineering: showing how there may be many different concepts of things not spatio-temporarily located, including things modally flexible, things

²² See my *Ontology made Easy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 82-114.

²³ See his "New Waves in Musical Ontology", in Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson-Jones, eds. *New Waves in Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 20-40, at p. 30-31 [check]

²⁴ "There are no things that are musical works", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 295-314, at p. 295.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 305-6.

created, and so on.²⁶ I undertake this very project in *Fiction and Metaphysics* (1999), arguing that our usual categories of abstract and concrete are too narrow, and showing how we can consistently broaden them.²⁷

Once we identify and articulate a concept of created abstracta (abstract artifacts), why deny that there are such things? I argue at great length elsewhere that such entities aren't strange but very familiar parts of our everyday life: that not only works of music and literature, but laws of state, marriages, and many other social and cultural objects are most naturally understood as created abstracta.²⁸ Jerrold Levinson also identifies created types like the Ford Thunderbird and the Lincoln Penny.²⁹

That, of course, is just one alleged contradiction in the idea of a musical work.³⁰ Other alleged contradictions have to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Elsewhere I address many of the standard reasons for thinking that our concepts of ordinary objects are inherently contradictory, or in conflict with a scientific ontology.³¹ In each case, I give reason to think that the accusation of inconsistency was overblown, often based on unmotivated and overly general 'metaphysical principles', and that there were ways to untangle the conceptual knots without convicting our ordinary concept of contradiction. So, while these are challenges that should be met on a case-by-case basis, there seems every prospect of meeting them.

A related objection is this: even if no case is directly made for a contradiction, what guarantees that there isn't a hidden inconsistency in the application or coapplication conditions associated with some of our art concepts?³² Again, I don't think we should be too worried. For one thing, concepts like 'symphony' and 'painting' are everyday concepts of ordinary English, and function well for us, so we have reasons to give them a default presumption of coherence until proven otherwise.³³ Worries about contradictory concepts have most often been raised where concepts (like 'tonk') are stipulatively introduced with explicitly contradiction-entailing rules. But if we must first interpret the rules of use for an extant term of our natural language, constraints of charity give us reason to

²⁶ Or more accurately, what's called for is not engineering from the ground up, since I think many of these concepts are part of ordinary thought, but rather identifying them, bringing them into philosophical discourse, and offering philosophical reconstructions.

²⁷ Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 115-136.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), 81.

³⁰ Allan Hazlett argues that there are no repeatable objects on rounds that all abstract objects must have their properties essentially, but that repeatable artworks (if there were any) would not). But all his arguments really seem to show is that works of music are not like numbers or pure Platonistic properties. See his "Against Repeatable Artworks", in Mag Uidhir, ed. *Art and Abstract Objects*, p. 162.

³¹ In my (2007) I examine arguments based on causal redundancy, conflicts with principles of co-location, vagueness and sorites arguments, the composition problem, and more.

³² This is a version of the familiar 'bad company' objection raised against neo-Fregeans in the philosophy of mathematics. I develop a fuller response to this line of objection in Chapter 8 of my (2015).

³³ Compare Bob Hale and Crispin Wright on the parallel objection to neo-Fregeanism, in "The Metaontology of Abstraction", in Chalmers et. al. *Metametaphysics*, 192.

interpret the concept in a way that is non-contradictory if that is at all possible. Given the success with which such concepts normally function in our lives and the constraint of interpretive charity, we are far less likely to turn up internal contradictions there (unless we interpolate some inappropriate ‘metaphysical principles’ that have nothing to do with the workings of the concepts at stake). Until or unless a convincing case is brought forward where we just do have to accept that the concept is internally contradictory—not just in conflict with ‘metaphysical principles’ the author happens to hold—we need not worry.

Even if we are presented with a case in which there plausibly is a contradiction in the application or co-application conditions, we needn’t worry too much. For again, interpretation should be made against the backdrop of the point of the discourse. It is hard to see how the point of discourse about works of music could be served by denying that there are any, since that is effectively a matter of rejecting (positive, atomic, first-order) *use* of the term ‘work of music’—seeing the term as never properly applied (or at least not while ‘in the ontology room’, as some would say). While uncovering a genuine contradiction would require us to make some decisions, we would do far better (given the point of the vocabulary) to minimally revise our concept than to deny that it refers. Consider baseball: Ted Cohen showed that the rules of baseball are subtly inconsistent (and those rules are explicit in a way that enables a kind of demonstration of inconsistency to be far more convincing there than in the case of a natural language term like ‘painting’ or ‘symphony’).³⁴ But the right conclusion to draw from that does not seem to be that there are no baseball games, pitches, base hits, etc.—and never were any. Instead, the right response seems to be to retain the entitlement to refer that comes with the application conditions, but modify the rules in as subtle ways as possible to avoid the contradictions.

Other more purely metaphysical objections (not alleging internal contradictions in the concept) have also been raised against the idea that there are created abstracta. Dodd, for example, suggests that Levinson’s indicated structures “fail to pass muster ontologically”.³⁵ That is, if we accept that there are indicated types created when a composer indicates a certain sound structure, it seems that we should accept that other entities are created when, say, we come into relations of showing or indication with other things. But, as Stefano Predelli puts it “...it does not appear to be the case that, if you show me the tallest building on campus you thereby bring into existence a new object, that is, the building-as-shown-by-you”;³⁶ to which Dodd adds: “It is difficult to see how a reply to this challenge could be anything other than ad hoc”,³⁷ concluding “Levinson’s indicated types look like queer, cross-categorial entities: ontologically suspect things that have been gerrymandered into existence for the express purpose of sweeping away an

³⁴ “There Are no Ties at First Base”, *Yale Review* 79 (1990): 314-22.

³⁵ Julian Dodd, “Musical Works: Ontology and Meta-Ontology”, *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008: 1113-1134, at p. 1121.

³⁶ “Musical Ontology and the Argument from Creation”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (2001): 279-92, at p. 289.

³⁷ “Musical Works”, 1121.

ontological difficulty”.³⁸ Guy Rohrbaugh says that Levinson’s view that “‘a new object comes to be’ lacks to performative oomph it needs”.³⁹

But no performative is required, and no magic oomph. If (given the application conditions for the term ‘musical work’) all it takes for a musical work to exist is for a composer to indicate a certain sound structure, then there are works of music.⁴⁰ Given the easy approach to ontology, as long as the application conditions for ‘musical work’ are sometimes fulfilled, then we are entitled to conclude that there are indicated structures.⁴¹ Barring conspiracy theories, it’s clear that the relevant conditions are (at least sometimes) fulfilled. The conclusion that there are such things falls out from the completely general easy approach to ontology;⁴² it’s not at all *ad hoc* or gerrymandered.

The critic will reply that then, by the same token, we must also accept the ‘crazy’ view that there are building-as-shown-by-me. The easy approach does entail that we may introduce concepts and terms with all sorts of different rules, for all sorts of purposes. If we have a term or concept that functions properly⁴³, then if the application conditions are fulfilled, there is a thing of the kind—end of story. So, yes, there are buildings-as-shown-by-me. Why does it sound ‘crazy’ to say there is a building-as-shown-by-me? Because we have absolutely no *use* for such a concept (given our current range of interests and practices). But that’s not reason to deny that there is such a thing. We do have use for other cultural/historical concepts, like shoes-as-worn-by-Judy Garland (suitable for museum display, unlike intrinsically similar shoes), or field-as-the-site-of-the-greatest-Civil War-battle. There is no reason to reject these historical cultural concepts, or to deny that they refer.

4. Keeping it Real 2: Avoiding Fictionalism

A related line of criticism is that the descriptive approach to ontology of art leads to a form of fictionalism about works of art. Guy Rohrbaugh suggests that fictionalism and eliminativism are “the natural endpoint of pragmatic thought about the ontology of art”,⁴⁴ and Andrew Kania argues that the descriptivist methodology gives us new reason to take seriously a fictionalist position about works of music according to which there are no musical works with the kinds of properties they (should) have according to musical practice; there is only a “robust system of representing [musical] works in our compositional, performative, and critical musical practices”, and that’s all that matters:⁴⁵

³⁸ Ibid, 1122.

³⁹ “Must Ontological Pragmatism be Self-Defeating?”, in Christy Mag Uidhir, ed., *Art and Abstract Objects*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30-48, at p. 33.

⁴⁰ For further justification of this approach to answering existence questions, see my (2015).

⁴¹ Barring inconsistencies or failure for the concept to be minimally introduced—for discussion of this see my discussion of how to avoid the bad company problem (2015, Chapter 8).

⁴² These are principles I argue for in detail in my (2015).

⁴³ For a more formal discussion of what it takes for a new term to be ‘minimally introduced’ and so to function properly, see my (2015, 263-4).

⁴⁴ “Must Ontological Pragmatism be Self-Defeating”*, 35.

⁴⁵ “The Methodology of Musical Ontology”*, 440.

If we truly embrace descriptivism, we embrace the idea that when we do musical ontology, what we describe is our conceptions of musical works, rather than the things themselves. There is a certain irony in the idea that if we take descriptivism, and thus our conceptions of musical works, seriously, we should conclude that those works have no existence *beyond* those conceptions of them.⁴⁶

But why do they think that the descriptivist methodology leads to a fictionalist position? Kania first mentions concerns that ‘seemingly intractable disputes’ give evidence that there is nothing with all the relevant properties attributed to musical works,⁴⁷ and then appeals to Occam’s razor: “If we are not required to posit the existence of musical works as we conceive them in order to account for the data our ontological theory must explain, then we should not”.⁴⁸ But the core reason Kania gives for thinking that the descriptivist methodology leads to fictionalism is that adopting a fictionalist position would *justify* the descriptivist methodology: “descriptivism and fictionalism [go] hand in hand”—for if we are fictionalists we are licensed to just examine how we conceive of musical works, rather than trying to investigate *how they really are*, and we can rule out objections about certain views being ‘metaphysically indefensible’.⁴⁹

But such a justification is, on my view, unnecessary and entirely at odds with my version of descriptivism. Given my version of descriptivism, it is entirely wrong-headed to think that “... if we take descriptivism seriously, we should also take seriously the theory that there may be no such things as musical works, independent of our conceptions of them”.⁵⁰

First, it is entirely unnecessary to adopt a fictionalist view to justify addressing questions in the ontology of art by way of something like conceptual analysis. The justification I have given above (and elsewhere) goes by way of arguments about why we need our terms to have certain kinds of conceptual content. And we’ve seen no reason to think that justification is overturned.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibid, 441.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 440.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 441.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 443.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 444.

⁵¹ I actually deny that when we do musical ontology we are engaging in “describing our conceptions of musical works, rather than the things themselves” (Kania 2008, 441). Conceptual analysis is analysis done *via* conceptual means. When we discuss works of music, we *use* the object language and are talking *about* ‘the works themselves’. The point, however, is that (given that methodology) there is no room for ‘slippage’: to talk of the modal properties of works of music (what *must* obtain for them to exist, when they *would* go out of existence, when two performances *would* count as the same work) is the object-language reflection of the rules of use for our terms. The ‘rather’ in the Kania quote is out of place—for the two are inextricably connected (and what we are doing most directly is discussing the works and their properties). There are independent arguments—most broadly to do with finding a defensible modal epistemology and a workable theory of reference—for thinking there are connections that entitle us to work out the most basic existence, identity, and persistence conditions for things of different kinds by way of extrapolation from our conceptual competence.

Elsewhere I emphasize the virtues of avoiding the epistemological mysteries of the discovery model, gaining methodological clarity, and achieving a better fit with our actual practices in giving reasons for or against particular views in the ontology of art. Nowhere do I appeal to fictionalism for a justification, nor do I have any need for such an appeal.

Secondly, adopting a fictionalist view is entirely *at odds with* my descriptivist approach, properly understood. Remember that on the easy approach to ontology, the existence conditions for works of art of various kinds are established by application conditions of the terms. What does it take, on this view, for a work of music to come into existence? Conditions might vary for different sorts of music, and we might quibble about the details, but it certainly seems sufficient for a work of classical music to come into existence that a composer write a (copy of a) score, and that the score be performed; sufficient for a pop song that a certain kind of recording be made, etc. As mentioned above, barring radical conspiracy theories, we have no reason at all for doubting that those conditions are sometimes met. So why go fictionalist?

We are fictionalists about an area of discourse if we think we are *merely* pretending when we use the relevant language—which means not being committed to its literal truth. So, in Kendall Walton’s famous examples,⁵² we are merely pretending if we say ‘there are five bears in the yard’ when we play the stumps-count-as-bears game. We are committed to something—the ‘real’ content that there are five stumps—without being committed to the literal content—that there are five bears—since there is something more that it takes for there to be bears than for there to just be stumps. But what more could it possibly be thought to take for there to ‘really’ be works of music than for there to be copies of scores, performances, recordings, and the like?⁵³ The easy approach to ontology not only doesn’t lead to fictionalism—it’s incompatible with it, and (as I have argued (2013b)) preferable to it.⁵⁴

5. Keeping it Flexible

If the descriptivist approach is adopted, conceptual analysis (of some form) will play a central role in determining what paintings, symphonies, novels (as we normally think and speak of them), and the like *are*. Conceptual analysis need not, however, be understood as a matter of asking people to introspectively self-report on the contents of their concepts. Instead we may look to our practices of identifying and distinguishing works, restoring and repairing, buying and selling and enforcing copyright, as well as appreciating and evaluating them. This interpretation should also be done in the context of understanding the point of the practice (and of the introduction of the relevant kind terms) in our lives. The reasons we want to track

⁵² *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 40.

⁵³ I argued elsewhere against familiar candidates such as that it would require “that there really be some ‘new object’ there”, “that there be something with the relevant modal properties”, etc. (*2014, 2015).

⁵⁴ For further arguments that fictionalism and my easy approach to ontology are incompatible, and that the easy approach is preferable, see my (2013b) and my (2015, 177-210).

paintings, say, as historical individuals produced by an individual artist (rather than just as visual pattern types) may have much to do with the fact that our interest in them is not (merely) as decorations, but as historical products valued in part for their achievements made in a particular context, and moreover as commodities valued in part for their historicity, uniqueness, and scarcity.

While some have welcomed the idea that conceptual analysis of some form should play a central role in the ontology of art, others have found this a disappointing result—thinking that it leaves nothing of interest for work in the ontology of art to do, and that it can't make sufficient sense of the revisionary views that have been defended.

I would like to close by addressing this worry. When I began work on this topic, I was mainly concerned with how we should understand and address questions about what the identity, existence, and persistence conditions for works of art of various sorts *are*, where we are simply *using* the relevant terms of our shared vocabulary ('painting', 'work of music', etc.) and asking the questions in what Carnap would have called an 'internal' sense. That is to say, when we are simply *employing* the conceptual scheme without bringing it into question or implicitly addressing deeper questions about what conceptual scheme we *should* be adopting.

One thing that I have not always emphasized enough is that, beyond work in descriptive conceptual analysis, there is also room for conceptual negotiation, conceptual revision, and more broadly work in what Carnap would have called 'conceptual engineering'.⁵⁵ That is to say, if there is some purpose that is not being well served by our current vocabulary, we can aim to introduce or propose new terms or concepts that may prove more useful. Or we can aim to modify our current concepts in ways that better suit the purposes of the terms—or those purposes we think they ought to have. These latter projects involve undertaking work in the spirit of what Carnap would have called 'external' questions, and I have begun to emphasize their importance and relevance in my more recent metaontological work (2016, 2017 and forthcoming).

David Davies argues that my view entails that "metaphysical inquiry into the nature of works of art of different kinds cannot be revisionary of our artistic practices and our beliefs about those practices" (2017, 125), and that I have not captured what revisionists in the ontology of art are up to (2017, 126). Let me respond to those charges in turn, beginning with the latter one.

Davies argues that I misrepresent:

what [Currie] and other ontologists of art are about: the task they set themselves is not answerable to the ways in which the folk fix the reference of art-kind sortals like 'painting,' nor are they proposing that we revise the meaning of such sortal terms. Rather, what Currie is attempting to illuminate... is the nature of the *object of critical and appreciative attention*. (2017, 126).

⁵⁵ James Young, argues for a somewhat similar Carnapian approach to the ontology of music, saying 'When we are dealing with the ontology of music we are simply concerned with the construction of a framework or way of speaking about entities'. See his "The Ontology of Musical Works: A Philosophical Pseudo-Problem", in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 6 (2011): 284-97, at 291.

He argues that revisionary ontologists of art are neither mistaken about, nor aiming to correct or revise our standard ‘folk’ concept of painting. Instead, he argues, in the hands of ontologists of art, ‘painting’ is “a theoretical term that is intended to refer to whatever kind of entity enters into the best *reflective explanation* of our ‘painting practice.’” (2017, 126). And this makes the ontology of art “by its very nature reflective and potentially revisionary of certain aspects of our folk beliefs and artistic practice, where what is revised is our folk theory of what the artwork, qua object of criticism and appreciation, is” (2017, 126). It is not the folk concept but the folk ‘theories’, according to Davies, that are called into question (2017, 127).

I am not entirely sure what to make of the suggestion that ontologists of art use terms like ‘painting’ as *theoretical terms*.⁵⁶ In the sciences, theoretical terms may be introduced to track whatever turns out to be the best *causal explanation* of an observed range of effects. But that can’t be what’s going on in the ontology of art. For, as I argued above, there is typically no prospect of appealing to any difference of causal-explanatory role among the different ontological candidates. As a result, I certainly have doubts that we can make sense of anything like an ‘alternative theoretical concept’ of paintings or works of music for ontologists of art to introduce—at least given this standard way of thinking of theoretical terms. (If Davies has some other sense of ‘theoretical term’ in mind, I would like to hear more about what it is.) Nonetheless, a deflationist like myself can certainly make sense the idea that we might at times attempt to engage in conceptual engineering to introduce a new concept. I may doubt that attempts to introduce this ‘theoretical concept’ *succeed*, and I may doubt the wisdom of inviting confusion by aiming to introduce a new concept with the old word. It is also hard to see how, if they *are* introducing a new concept (with the old word) that doesn’t (contrary to Davies’ claim (2017, 127)) risk ‘changing the subject’ (2017, 127). But I can certainly allow, in general, that conceptual engineering may sometimes be an appropriate move.

I *can* make sense of the idea that ontologists of art are aiming to articulate the concept that makes the best sense of our various practices surrounding paintings—to look for what sorts of objects, if any, our critical and appreciative practices *would have to be about, for them to make sense*. If that is what Davies is suggesting, then it is not very different from the methodology I recommend (though I am perhaps more insistent than Davies on taking our *whole range* of practices into account—not just those of critics and appreciators, but also of creators, purveyors, purchasers, restorers, historians...). If what we are doing is aiming to see what articulation of a concept of painting (say) would fit best with the whole range of our painting-regarding practices, then I am, and have always been, on board with that. And then it is hard to see how that is a different matter than trying, in a sophisticated way, to articulate our standard art concepts (not a matter of introducing a new concept). Of course, that might end up leading to recommendations to revise of some elements of the implicit concept, if it turns out to be internally inconsistent. But, as I noted in section 2 above, I have argued elsewhere that such inconsistencies are generally rare and avoidable. Nonetheless, of course any alleged incoherencies have to be evaluated on a case by case basis, and

⁵⁶ Nor am I convinced that there are ‘folk theories’ here to overturn.

if there is an inconsistency, that would give a *prima facie* case for engaging in some revision.⁵⁷

I can also make sense of another project ontologists of art may be involved in—one which has greater potential to be revisionary. That project is not to articulate the concept (say, of painting) that best fits the range of practices we *do* have, but rather lobbying for adopting a concept that would best fit a range of practices we *ought to have*. So, for example, when Mark Sagoff (1978) says that paintings and sculptures cannot be restored, he need not be seen as not saying something obviously false given the actual concept of painting we employ in everyday life and in the conservation and restoration departments of museums. Instead, we can see him as *pressing for changes in our conservation and restoration practices*, changes that would go along with revising our concept of art in a way that would track the historical original. And these revisions in turn are tied up with *normative* views, that we do and should value works of art as historical individuals (much as we love persons), not merely as the stimulus for a certain kind of experience.

Davies' own earlier work can also be read in this light. He takes it that a work of art is “whatever functions as a unit of criticism and appreciation”, and goes on to argue that it is those practices of criticism and appreciation we *should* have that matter (2004, 143); the question is what is “the *proper* object of criticism and appreciation” (2017, 126, italics mine). He goes on to argue that those practices we *should* have would fit best with a view on which works of art are thought of as performances. And so, he can be seen *lobbying for* a change in our conception of a work of art, on pragmatic grounds: that it would be better suited for those critical and appreciative practices we *ought to have*.

So, in spite of my deflationary stance, I can still make sense of something legitimate that revisionists can be, and often have been, up to. Perhaps some revisionists will reject this interpretation of what they are doing. There are two responses to this, which I have developed elsewhere. First, if they insist on being interpreted as making quasi-scientific ‘discoveries’ that justify their revisions, they leave themselves with formidable epistemological and methodological puzzles (see my 2015). Second, the actual grounds given for the changes proposed by revisionists often seem far better suited to give pragmatic grounds for a change of our linguistic or other practices, then as alleged ‘discoveries’ of covert metaphysical ‘facts’. Moreover, revisionists may be very well interpreted as engaged in the common (but only recently recognized) practice of metalinguistic negotiation (see Plunkett and Sundell 2013)—*using* certain terms in the object language (and so saying something worldly) as a way of *doing* something pragmatic: pressing for views about how these terms are *to be* used.⁵⁸ Revisionists may also be pressing for

⁵⁷ Though see Burgess (2013) who argues that we may have reasons to live with inconsistencies in the truth predicate.

⁵⁸ A metalinguistic negotiation occurs when disputants use certain statements in the object language not with a view to “exchanging factual information about language, but rather negotiating its appropriate use” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 15). I have argued elsewhere that many metaphysical debates can be seen as implicitly engaged in metalinguistic negotiation—using the relevant terms in

revisions at a deeper level: revisions not concerning what theoretic concept of painting we employ to best fit our actual practices, but rather revisions in our practices themselves (where such revisions would come along with revisions in the concept).

Beyond the question of how to interpret revisionists, the deeper issue is whether a deflationist like myself can (*pace* Davies) allow scope for revision. It is misleading to say that my view entails that “metaphysical inquiry into the nature of works of art of different kinds cannot be revisionary” (Davies 2017, 125). Instead, my view has consequences for how we can understand *what revision is: what such revisionary views are, and how they are properly motivated and assessed*.

Revisionary views in the ontology of art cannot, on my view, be seen as legitimately presenting metaphysical ‘discoveries’ about what works of painting or music ‘really are’, taking these in the spirit of internal claims.

I can certainly allow, however, that there may be grounds for revising our artistic, critical, appreciative, restorative, or other practices.⁵⁹ I can also allow that *were we to* take on board such revisions, *we should also* revise our prior understanding (whether for everyday or theoretical purposes, or both) of what works of paintings are—and accordingly revise or replace the concept.

Where I differ from revisionists like Dodd (though I suspect, not—or not as much—from Davies) is in what I think we can see as the proper *grounds* for these revisions. On my view, in pressing for revisions one shouldn’t pretend to take ‘ontological discoveries’ as the grounds, or take ‘metaphysical constraints’ to play an important role (except to the extent that these can be seen as demands for the coherence or consistency of a broader conceptual scheme, for example). The proper grounds for change are not ‘metaphysical’ discoveries or constraints, but pragmatic and more broadly normative grounds. For example, that, *we should value works of art as historical individuals*, and so should change our conceptual and conservation practices in ways that respect that. Or that *we should be evaluating* not (simply) what ‘appears on the page’, but what the artist has *achieved* in getting it there—and that we should accordingly alter our concept of work of art to reflect that. I do not mean to endorse these particular reasons, only to insist that, to undertake revisionary work on the ontology of art in a non-deceptive, clear-headed way, we need to see revisionary proposals as based in such normative considerations, where we can see them for what they are and assess them properly.

In sum, it is a misunderstanding to think that my approach can’t allow for revision—I am as open to the need for changes in our practices (and in whatever conception goes along with that) as anyone else. We can thus not only keep the ontology of art easy, and keep it real, but also keep it flexible: responsive to needed changes, where artistic practices change, or where they *should* change.

As a result, even if we accept the easy approach to ontology, and so come to side with the ‘descriptivist’ camp, there is much of interest that remains to be done

world-regarding indicatives as a way of pressing for changes in how the relevant terms *should be* used.

⁵⁹ Though these recommendations for revision can’t be based in a need to ‘fit’ certain alleged ‘ontological facts’—they must be pragmatic. See my (forthcoming).

in the ontology of art. We may be involved, on the one hand, in teasing out from our wide range of practices what *actual* art concepts (of paintings, symphonies, installations...) are at work in a given context, aiming to articulate them and work out what follows from them. Doing so may also require conceptual engineering, at least from a philosophical point of view: articulating new ontological concepts (such as that of *abstract artifacts*) as ways of making explicit what was presupposed in the employment of some of our standard art concepts. But we can also go beyond all of this. We can also address, and be fruitfully engaged in, normative questions: questions about what conceptual scheme we *ought to have* when we engage in our art-regarding practices, and more deeply still, questions about what artistic, critical, and appreciative practices we *ought to have*. The important thing is simply to see these questions for what they are, not to pretend they are questions about covert 'metaphysical facts' to be revealed by some process of quasi-scientific discovery.

Once we see recent debates in the ontology of art in this light, we are in a better position to evaluate the reasons for these suggestions, and avoid being led astray by appeals to metaphysical qualms and principles. Most importantly, we can assess in a clear and reasoned way what we *should* do with the various aspects of the conceptual scheme we employ when we think and talk about art.

Conclusion:

I have argued above that Dodd does not undermine the core argument for the descriptive approach, so that the original reason for adopting it remain intact, and we can keep the ontology of art easy. I have also aimed to show that the approach does not readily lead to eliminativism or fictionalism. On the contrary, it is opposed to these positions, so we can retain this deflationary approach, and keep the ontology of art 'real'. Finally, I have argued that the approach can make sense of revisionary work that has been, and can be, done—it simply must interpret these revisions as ways of pressing for changes in our conceptual scheme, or (more deeply) in our practices—not as purported 'discoveries' of 'ontological facts'. In that way, one may adopt a deflationary approach to the ontology of art, and still keep it flexible, and open to reasons for change, while making the pragmatic and normative nature of these reasons transparent.

The descriptivist methodology is a powerful tool in the hands of ontologists of art. For it enables us to offer a view of what works of art (of various kinds) are, in a way that is responsive to our practices and the point of the discourse. Perhaps most importantly, it enables us to articulate these views untroubled by worries about whether the objects so identified 'pass ontological muster', accusations that they violate supposed 'metaphysical principles', or worries that it might 'turn out' that really there are no such things. Once such idle worries are put aside, we can get on with the interesting and often difficult tasks of articulating our art concepts, assessing their coherence, and determining whether we should make any changes to fit the art practices we have—or those we should have.

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