Errors in 'The History of an Error'

1. Introduction

In a recent article in this journal Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley argue that relational theories of art (most notably the institutional theory) are rooted in a misunderstanding of what it would take to falsify the family resemblance theories they are meant to supplant and, hence, are doomed to failure.[1] As they colourfully put it, 'relational theorizing about art has amounted to nothing more than a fifty-year trip up a blind alley' (151). In this article, we argue that Neill and Ridley have made a number of errors in their arguments and, hence, may be guilty of sending some readers on an errant (but thankfully brief) trip of their own.

Before we discuss the arguments put forth by Neill and Ridley, we want to emphasize that it is no part of our aim in this article to argue for relationalism or institutionalism. Rather, our goal is more minimal—to convince the reader that relationalists should not be seen as misunderstanding the falsification conditions of the family resemblance view and that such theories are not doomed to failure for the reasons offered by Neill and Ridley. Whether relationalism or institutionalism about art is correct is another matter entirely.

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[1] Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, 'Relational Theories of Art: the History of an Error', *BJA* 52 (2012), 141-151. All following page numbers in brackets refer to this text. As Neill and Ridley focus their criticism of relationalism on institutional theories, we will follow suit in our reply, bearing in mind that parallel arguments can be made with respect to other relational theories, such as Jerrold Levinson's intentional-historical account ('Defining Art Historically', *BJA* 19 (1979), 232-250).

2. Neill and Ridley against the Relational Theory

Neill and Ridley argue that relational theories are ultimately unsuccessful in providing a plausible alternative to the Wittgenstein-inspired family resemblance approach to the concept of art which Morris Weitz argued for in his seminal paper.[2] Following Maurice Mandelbaum, relational theorists admit that Weitz was right to say that 'art' cannot be defined if one focuses solely on its *manifest* (that is, non-relational) properties, but claim that it is possible to define it by focusing on its *relational* properties.[3] Neill and Ridley present their argument against this claim in three main parts.

First, they accuse the relationalists of 'a serious misapprehension of what would falsify the family resemblance conception of art' (143). Theorists who aim to identify relational properties which might serve as necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept 'art', fail to understand that 'it can never be enough, if one wants to deny that such-and-such is the family resemblance concept that it appears to be, merely to show the presence of some common feature. Rather, one must also and essentially show how that feature is responsible for the patterns of similarity to which the family resemblance theorist appeals' (146). Neill and Ridley call this the 'explanatory requirement'.

Second, Neill and Ridley claim that relational theories fail to meet this requirement. For example, Dickie's later institutional definition identifies a feature which is common to all art: being 'an artefact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public', but this feature does not explain similarities among artworks.[4] According to Neill and Ridley, it is like a fibre which runs from one end of the rope to the other, but does no load-bearing work - its presence is incidental. Thus Dickie failed to meet the

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[2] Morris Weitz, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956), 27–35.

[3] Maurice Mandelbaum, 'Family Resemblances and Generalizations concerning the Arts', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), 219–28.

[4] George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Chicago: Spectrum Press, 1997), 80.

explanatory requirement, because the institutional condition is not 'responsible for our having a concept of art, say, rather than just a ragbag of homophonous uses' (148).

Third, even if a relational theory could satisfy the explanatory requirement, the authors argue, it could not at the same time meet Weitz's openness requirement. What future art will be like is, and should be, an open question, and thus any definition which tries to capture the essence of art by identifying its common manifest properties must fail as soon as artists innovate. A successful theory must somehow allow for artistic freedom and innovation. But satisfying both requirements is not easy, because the two are in a 'serious tension': one requires that we identify features common to all and only art and show how they are responsible for similarities between artworks, the other that we remain 'maximally *silent* about the manifest properties of art — i.e. about those very properties among which the patterns of similarity that the resemblance theorist appeals to are to be found' (148). It is allegedly impossible to satisfy both requirements at the same time, leaving the relationalist either unable to falsify the resemblance view, or unable to account for the ever-changing nature of art. Ultimately, relational theories might succeed in tracking the extension of 'art', but can never deliver what really matters - its intension and meaning (149).[5]

3. Falsifying the Family Resemblance Theory?

As discussed above, one of Neill and Ridley's central claims is that the relationalist has misunderstood what it would take to establish that the family resemblance theory is false. What is the family resemblance conception of art exactly? Here is Weitz's characterization of it: 'If we actually look and see what it is that we call "art," we will also find no common properties - only strands of similarity. Knowing

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[5] One oddity about this claim is that some relationalists explicitly address both the extension and intension (i.e., meaning) of 'art'. See, for example, Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically'. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for pointing this out.

what art is not apprehending some manifest or latent essence but being able to recognize, describe, and explain those things we call "art" in virtue of these similarities'.[6] On one natural reading of this (call it *the negative conception*), the family resemblance approach includes a commitment to the non-existence of a common property shared by all works of art. It is clear what would falsify the negative conception: if we 'look and see' and discover a common property possessed by all works of art then the family resemblance view is shown to be mistaken. The relationalist who argues against the family resemblance theory by showing the presence of some common feature does not misunderstand what it takes to falsify the negative conception of family resemblance.

Of course, Neill and Ridley do not understand the family resemblance approach as essentially including the negative claim specified above. (We can also see this in their approving comments about Berys Gaut's cluster conception of art, since Gaut is explicit that there is a common property shared by all works of art.)[7] They characterize a family resemblance concept as one 'whose application is determined not by properties shared by all of its instances' but, rather, by a complex collection of overlapping similarities (141). Such a claim cannot be falsified by pointing to a feature that all works of art have in common; instead, it would require showing that the application of the concept is determined by something more than 'a complicated network of similarities' (141). On some versions of relationalism, this would be achieved if the relationalist theory were established as correct.[8] That is, insofar as the relationalist is properly seen as aiming to falsify the family resemblance theory they achieve this by

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

[7] Berys Gaut, '"Art" as a Cluster Concept', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 25-44, at 29.

[8] Some relationalists aim at making a claim about concepts; others are resolutely metaphysical in their aim. Success by the latter might not falsify the family resemblance theory as characterized by Neill and Ridley.

making the case for their own account of the concept's application conditions - not by simply pointing to a property shared by all works of art.

But should the relationalist be seen as centrally concerned with falsifying the family resemblance theory? Neill and Ridley seem to think so. We are sceptical. Like Kendall Walton, we think that a great deal of philosophical aesthetics can be seen as primarily concerned with the construction of theories; that is, with 'organizing the data in a perspicuous manner, devising conceptual structures, constructing theories, to clarify and explain the data'.[9] Even when the falsification of competing theories is s pursued, this is often secondary to the main goal of theory building. Moreover, it is a mistake to construe a number of early relationalists as primarily aiming to falsify the family resemblance theory rather than as making the case for an alternative theory or criticizing the arguments offered in favour of the family resemblance account. Danto, in 'The Artworld', does not refer to family resemblance theories and is mostly concerned to explore the question of what makes the difference between a work of art and a mere real thing which looks exactly like it.[10] Dickie, in *Art and the Aesthetic*, is concerned with much more than falsifying the family resemblance theory. For example, he criticizes Weitz's arguments for the family resemblance account by arguing that the openness of the subconcepts of art is consistent with the non-open nature of art itself, that Weitz's argument against the artefactuality condition rests on an equivocation, and that defining art does not undercut the creativity of artmaking.[11] Meanwhile, Levinson, in 'Defining Art Historically', states explicitly that his theory is 'an alternative to the institutional theory of art', and makes no references to Weitz or the family resemblance view at all.[12]

[9] Kendall Walton, 'Aesthetics—What? Why? And Wherefore?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007), 151.

[10] Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964), 571-584.

[11] George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 19-52.

[12] Levinson, 'Defining Art Historically', 232.

None of these arguments are naturally seen as part of a project of falsifying the family resemblance theory.

Neill and Ridley are, however, onto something when they discuss a case in which there is some manifest feature which is common to all members of a category but, nevertheless, is 'incidental' or does 'no work' (145). A relationalist cannot be satisfied with what Mag Uidhir has called 'trivially necessary conditions'.[13] Just as an aesthetic theorist would not count as having offered even part of a successful theory if they declared that x could be a work of art only if x were self-identical, so too the relationalist would not count as having made any progress if they established that something is art only if it is not married to Socrates. Such properties, as Mag Uidhir puts it, tell 'us nothing interesting or non-trivial'.[14] These are not the sort of properties that present a challenge to the family resemblance theorists, nor could they provide the basis of a successful aesthetic theory. The relationalist aims to tell us something interesting and substantive about art - identifying trivially necessary conditions won't help to achieve this aim.

4. Why the Relationalist Need Not Satisfy the Explanatory Requirement

Must the relationalist show how the relational feature which they point to is 'responsible for the patterns of similarity to which the family resemblance theorist appeals' (146)? If the suggestion is that this feature alone must be shown to be responsible for those patterns of similarity, we do not see why this is the case. Consider a concept C which appears, superficially, to be correctly captured by the family resemblance account but is, in fact, constituted by some relational feature R. Would falsifying the resemblance account require showing that R, by itself, explained the patterns of similarities to which the family resemblance theorist appealed? Of course not. Some other facts might play a significant role in

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[13] Christy Mag Uidhir, *Art and Art Attempts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

[14] Ibid., 5.

explaining those patterns of similarity. Now consider the following list of people who have been vice chancellors of University of Southampton: Sir Robert Stanford Wood, David Gwilym Jones, Kenneth Mather, Laurence Gower, John Roberts CBE, Sir Gordon Higginson, Sir Howard Newby, Sir William Wakeham, and Don Nutbeam. There are certainly patterns of similarity to which a family resemblance theorist of this category might appeal; for example, some members of the category were granted British honours, almost all were academics, a couple were engineers, all were conventionally racialized as white and gendered as male in our culture. But, of course, anyone proposing a family resemblance theory of this category would be misguided, since the category is a paradigmatic example for which some sort of relational (perhaps institutional) theory is appropriate. Notice, however, that it is implausible that the relational feature that underwrites the unity of this category (having been approved by some University committee or something of the sort) is solely responsible for the relevant patterns of similarity that we find when examining the category. Rather, a full explanation will likely appeal to such factors as tradition and bias. Similarly, we suggest, there is no reason why the relationalist about art should be expected to show that the relational feature which putatively underwrites the unity of the category of art is also responsible on its own for the patterns of similarity to which the family resemblance theorist points. For just as in the case of vice-chancellors, there may be other contingent factors (for example, availability of raw materials, patterns of trade and colonization, religious traditions) which play a significant role in explaining those similarities.

Moreover, someone engaged in the project of providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton would not be required to explain why most of them were awarded British honours. Similarly we see no reason to think that someone engaged in constructing a philosophical theory of art must address why the category of art exhibits various strands of similarity and resemblance - such a project might be an interesting one, but it is not a condition for an adequate theory of art. The explanatory requirement proposed by Neill and Ridley is, then, too strong.

Nevertheless, we think that Neill and Ridley are right that the relationalist must meet some sort of explanatory requirement. As argued above, relationalists would not succeed if they merely point to some trivial necessary condition for being a work of art (e.g., being self-identical). And this is because a successful relational theory needs to offer some explanation of why various things are art. Those trivial features cannot do this work. So there is a reasonable explanatory requirement on any adequate relational theory; however, this - we shall argue - is a requirement which the relationalist has no difficulty meeting.

5. How the Relationalist can Satisfy All Requirements

Contra Neill and Ridley, we think that relational theories can succeed in satisfying both the explanatory and openness requirements at the same time. First, we argue that this feat is fairly easy if we follow the reasonable version of the explanatory requirement - avoid triviality and explain why various things are art. Second, we show that even if the implausibly demanding explanatory requirement could be defended, there are still some versions of the institutional definition which could achieve what Neill and Ridley think impossible.

Institutional theories were constructed with the openness requirement in mind: virtually anything can be presented to an artwork public. Further, it is likely that artworks could not stop being 'of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public.'[15] In any case, Neill and Ridley seem to accept that institutionalism does meet the openness requirement (147-148) and we see no reason to challenge

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[15] Dickie, *The Art Circle*, 80. Even works which are never seen by anyone but their creators are still 'of a kind' which is typically presented, and are presented to the artists who count as public members themselves.

them in the context of this paper.[16] But can such features satisfy the minimal explanatory requirement we described at the end of the last section? Dickie's theory has been criticized for not being particularly informative, largely because the properties it identifies might not be sufficient to explain why things are art. Instead, all it allegedly tells us is how art fits into a social context, or what people accept as art - but not what art actually is.[17] If these criticisms are misguided,[18] then Dickie's original institutional theory can likely meet both the openness and the modest explanatory requirement. But if they are correct, then the features identified by relational theories as common to all artworks might indeed be merely incidental, or at least prove insufficient to satisfy even this modest requirement.

Whatever one thinks about this challenge to Dickie's own theories, relational theories can meet it – some versions of the institutional definition can satisfy both the modest explanatory as well as openness requirements. For example, Derek Matravers argues that the institutionalist should embrace 'weak proceduralism', the view that while satisfying the institutional condition is necessary for acquiring art status, other conditions might also be involved.[19] In particular, people who present their works to the artworld public typically do so for good reasons, for example because their work is beautiful and faithfully represents its subject. Thus a work is art not only because it was presented to an artworld

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[16] Other relationalist views may have even less trouble meeting the openness requirement. See, for example, Levinson 'Defining Art Historically' and Noël Carroll, 'Art, Practice, and Narrative', *The Monist* 71 (1988), 140-156.

[17] See, for instance, Noël Carroll, 'Identifying Art', in Robert J. Yanal (ed.) *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) and Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[18] As many suggest. See, for example, Robert J. Yanal, 'The Institutional Theory of Art', in Michael Kelly (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[19] Derek Matravers, 'The Institutional Theory: A Protean Creature', *BJA* 40 (2000), 244; this view is based on remarks Dickie made in his 'Wollheim's Dilemma', *BJA* 38 (1998), 127-135.

public, but also because 'it conforms to some reason for being a work of art operative in the artworld at the time'.[20] The institutionalists can now provide a more satisfying explanation of why a given object should qualify as art: because there were good reasons to present it. Moreover, this move does not require them to fall short of meeting the openness requirement, as it is perfectly possible that the reasons used to justify presentation (or conferral) can change over time. This is rather common in other areas where institutional status is involved: one would become a knight for different reasons in the 14th and in the 20th centuries. Similarly, while something's *beautifully and faithfully representing its subject* might have been a good reason to present it to the artwork public (or confer the relevant status) in the 18th century, in the 20th century *offering an original approach to the medium* might be more important.

Further, even if the implausibly stringent version of the explanatory requirement could be defended, some institutional theories could still meet it. Simon Fokt offers a view which is weakly proceduralist in the sense described above, requiring that artworld members have good reasons to justify presentation to the artworld.[21] Fokt's version of the theory uses Berys Gaut's cluster account of art (which, it is worth mentioning, is related directly to the resemblance accounts preferred by Neill and Ridley) as an auxiliary theory within his institutional definition to provide a detailed description of the aforementioned reasons.[22] A work can become art if and only if it has the status conferred upon it for good reasons, and one has a good reason to confer the status on a work if it satisfies at least one subset from the cluster of criteria which is treated as sufficient by the artworld members. Since artworlds change over time, the subsets which are respected as sufficient at different times can change, allowing people to have different reasons to confer the status at different times. This enables the definition to meet the

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[20] Matravers, 'The Institutional Theory', 246.

[21] Simon Fokt, 'Solving Wollheim's Dilemma: A Fix for the Institutional Definition of Art', *Metaphilosophy* 44 (2013), 640-654.

[22] Gaut, '"Art" as a Cluster Concept'.

openness requirement. The robust explanatory requirement is satisfied by supplementing the institutional condition with specific reasons for status conferral which refer directly to a list of criteria already deemed highly relevant to determining why something is art by the resemblance theorists (142). Since the good reasons for status conferral draw directly from the cluster of criteria which inform resemblance theories, meeting the condition of 'satisfying a good reason for status conferral' is in fact responsible for the patterns of similarity to which Neill and Ridley appeal. Similarities between artworks exist because they all had the status conferred upon them for related reasons. Thus Fokt's definition can meet both the openness, and the strict version of the explanatory requirement.

6. Conclusion

Neill and Ridley's criticisms miss the target, as their claims revolve around accusing relationalists of not meeting expectations which they are not in fact required to meet. It is not the case that relationalists misunderstood what it is to falsify the resemblance view. Nor are their theories required to meet the overly demanding explanatory requirement described by Neill and Ridley. Finally, there are at least some versions of the institutional definition which can meet even this demanding requirement while also meeting the openness requirement.

Ultimately, we believe that Neill and Ridley's obituary for relational theories was premature. Even if it is the case that they are flawed and doomed to failure, it is not for the reasons identified in 'The History of an Error'.[23]