

DISPENSING WITH THE GENERIC SENSE OF "ART"

Raymond Kolcaba

A central question in aesthetics is, "What is art?" The classic aesthetic theorists answered it by presenting definitions of art. The inadequacies of these definitions have led contemporary writers to shift their inquiries to an analysis of language. "What is art?" is taken to ask, "What does the term 'art' mean?" An adequate answer to this question is said to be a defensible definition of the term.

The formulation of such a definition is an onerous chore. Most of the term's senses are broad, vague, and extremely general, and they are numerous. Lexical entries alone number in excess of fifteen. The term's extension is bewildering in its complexity and monstrous in size. Moreover, under the right conditions, its senses seem to admit anything into its extension--thereby denying the term significance.

One purported solution to the problem of definition is to discover the term's generic sense. The generic sense is supposed to be the term's broadest sense because it would cover all of its compatible senses and have its fullest or widest extension. The suggestion is that it will reveal what art is and can be used to set boundaries for the term's extension. By so doing, the term would be shown to be significant.

We may question, though, whether "art" has a *the* generic sense. Short of producing it, two arguments can be offered for its existence. The first is that, since the term has a number of senses, a generic sense can be extrapolated from them. A genus can be inferred from definitions of species. The second argument is that the term is correctly used to refer to the full range of objects which are noncontroversially accepted as art. We could not do this without the generic sense to guide the way. So, there must be a *the* generic sense.

The arguments are flawed in a number of respects. The second premise of the first argument begs the question. A genus can be inferred from definitions of species only if both genus and species already stand in a genus/species relation. We would not know that we were looking at definitions of *species* unless we knew that there was a genus of which they were species. Furthermore, when a category of items is defined as a *species*,

the genus concept is used in its definition. When senses are defined in other ways (as are most of the senses of "art"), we should not expect a genus concept to be present.

The question then is, "Is there a meaning of 'art' which stands to 'art's' meanings as genus to species?" If so, there would be a common semantic element running through *all* compatible senses of the term that would be relevant to defining it. Even if such an element could be found, it would say less than the overly general senses of "art" already say because a genus term means less than any of its species terms. This indicates that a *the* generic sense would answer, "What is art?" in a simplistic way and only on a superficial level.

The saving grace of a generic sense is supposed to be its capacity to define the term's extension. The second premise of argument two claims that the noncontroversial portion of the extension of "art" can be identified only through applying a generic sense. I will argue that this claim is false because there is an alternative way to identify this part of the term's extension. The explanation given, moreover, will present the correct way to explore its semantics, account for how the term is significant, and indicate why borderline cases do not lead it to include everything. In short, for standard theoretical and practical purposes, the efficaciousness of a *the* generic sense is in question while other resources hold promise.

We may think that the term's extension can be identified by applying the senses of the term. The extension, though, seems to be far more complex than the senses would indicate. The term is at the apex of many-layered hierarchies of category terms. They include: arts as organized by media, by subject matter, and into fine or applied arts; performing or visual arts; graphic arts; plastic arts; and so on. Media divide branches of art into seven fine arts, ceramics, photography, and so on. Other arts are multimedia forms such as cinema, opera, video art, and so on.

"Art" can also signify any craft, trade, or profession. Subcategories would include cinematic arts, industrial arts, and medical arts. Each separates into a complex tree of subspecialties. The term means the ability to make things or be creative, and so the abilities to engage in domestic arts or vocational arts are subcategories. Likewise, art involves making things or doing things that express emotion, have form,

art, decorative art, "the art of illusion," and so on. "Art" signifies the principles and techniques of creative work, which may separate "art" into art theory and art practice. Many of the above categories can also be taken as they were defined in a historical period.

This profusion of categories and subcategories goes on and on. Many of the hierarchies of which they are a part are not fixed. New categories can be added, as with the expansion in the number of fine arts in this century. Categories can be borrowed from a hierarchy and put into a new hierarchy as when the terms "performing arts" and "visual arts" were introduced. A new hierarchy can be added, such as machine art with computer art as a subcategory. The complexity of these hierarchies is difficult to sort out given the amount of overlap among categories, duplication of categories at varying levels of generality, and differences of perspective originating from placing many or few categories in a hierarchy. We cannot even be certain that some major portion of "art"'s hierarchies has not been omitted. The explication of the categories of art is a tall order.

Each category term specifies an extension which is also part of the extension of the term; that is, the extensions of "painting," "music," "poetry," and so on, double as parts of the extension of "art." When we are asked to consider the term's extension we think of portions of it without realizing that we are using the senses of other terms organized by "art." We say, "That's art," because we know that it is a painting, song, or poem. In this way, we can specify parts of "art"'s extension even though we do not know an alleged generic sense.

Let us examine this contention in more detail. Suppose that we learn as a matter of convention that each painting is an art work. Equipped with this knowledge, we set out to find paintings. In order to identify an object as a painting, do we first have to identify it as art? I think not. The meaning of the term "painting" entails characteristics besides that it is art. These other attributes as well as our experience of paintings enable us to identify paintings! We apply attributes of paintings, or we form analogies between our experience of them and newly encountered objects. Paintings and the variety of materials comprising the medium are easily identifiable. In this process, the alleged generic sense is not needed.

Although the categories are semantically rich, we may

lack adequate definitions of many category terms. Even so, when a question about a term's sense arises, we can turn to the hierarchy or hierarchies of which it is a part for an answer. By moving up in it, we have broader categories which encompass that sense; and, when we move down in it, we have narrower categories which articulate its types. While this does not guarantee that the categories will be explicitly definable, it does indicate that semantic resources can be utilized which are unavailable at the level of a generic sense.

Is a *the* generic sense the basis on which "art"'s hierarchies are formed? While an affirmative answer is tempting, it is easy to resist when considering that the formulation and use of the categories did not uncover a generic sense. Presumably it would have had to be widely used but at the same time either not explicitly known or at least not reported. But many senses of "art" are reported, and we would expect that the conventions associated with them, the pragmatics of their use, and historical accidents in their linguistic history could be used to explain how the hierarchies were formed.

Even if a *the* generic sense were known, it would be rarely called upon to decide if something is art because the category terms short-circuit such queries. Once something is correctly categorized as a symphony, it is superfluous to ask if it is art. By definition, all symphonies are art. So, we rarely hear it said, "It is a symphony, but is it art?" since the question answers itself. If such a question is asked, we may conclude that either the person does not understand the meanings of the words or is rhetorically questioning whether the symphony is *good* art. The latter question could be better expressed by, "Is the symphony good art?"

The semantics of "art" is best explored through considering the meanings of its category terms. We concluded that a generic sense would say very little; it may be as anemic as, "Art is skill." The bulk of the semantics, then, is entailed in the meanings of the category terms which mention features that define categories relative to others. Since they are not features of *all* art but just *some* art, they should be reported by topic in disjunctive form. A simplified example pertinent to art media is that art works are expressed in sound, or language, or paint, or bodily movement, or so on. A large conjunction of robust disjunctions would be required to capture the magnitude

and detail of the semantics of "art."

Is "art" significant? If it is not, then it potentially admits anything into its class of referents. This issue can be taken as the genesis of the concern over borderline cases or that the concept has fuzzy edges. The difficult challenge is to specify what it defensibly excludes. This has been one motivation for seeking conditions that specify the term's exact extension. The perplexity engendered by not finding such conditions has led some authors to argue that the quest is mistaken.

Let's dismiss the expectation that a *the* generic sense is to serve as a sorting mechanism for separating art from non-art. While the term "art" is supposed to designate all and only art, it lacks sufficient detail for setting limits on the class of entities in its extension. It functions in conjunction with its hierarchies of category terms among which there is division of labor. In practical contexts, it is only called upon to sort art by itself when the hierarchies have failed to provide sufficient grounds for a verdict. Its meanings usually fail to yield sufficient reasons because it is not specialized to that function.

Terms that are at or near the bottom of a hierarchy of categories are often used to decide the status of a borderline case. The reason why they are used is that each term's sense entails the senses of the terms directly above it in the hierarchy. Consider the series "art," "art form," "music," "types of composition," and "symphony." The terms increase in semantic complexity from top to bottom. "Symphony" is defined in part by *all* of the others above it. A symphony is art, an art form, music, and a type of composition.

This information may be used in a definition of "symphony" which could begin, "An art form which is a type of musical composition that. . . ." In the genus/species sort of definition, it would go beyond these senses to present features of symphonies that differentiate them from other types of composition. The terms at the bottom of the hierarchies of "art" are richest in meaning while at the top "art" is poorest.

The significance of "art" is based upon its function of organizing categories and can be checked by seeing if anything could potentially be included as one of its categories. Take the example of scientific knowledge. Some such knowledge could be used in producing a work of art or be depicted in one. This is different from *all* such knowledge comprising a category of art.

If we were only considering an *item* of scientific

knowledge, a case may be presented that it fits into one of the existing categories of "art" because it has some appropriate features or stands in some of the right relations. Others may reject this rationale because the item of knowledge lacks certain features or does not stand in other right relations. A borderline case controversy has ensued. The same kind of controversy does not arise about scientific knowledge being a category of art; presently, it is not. Likewise, someone may argue that some broken heart, dinosaur, three sisters, or itchy scalp are works of art. They may be shown to be genuine borderline cases; but, as categories, broken hearts, dinosaurs, collections of three sisters, and itchy scalps are not under "art." The exclusion of categories demonstrates that "art" is significant.

Let us review the main points in this discussion. If "art" has a *the* generic sense, it is more general than the very general senses of the term, and its semantics is weaker than any of the terms which are hierarchically arranged beneath it. A *the* generic sense would be in a comparatively impoverished position to define the vast and diverse extension of "art."

The hierarchies of categories organized by "art" utilize a large vocabulary that can be used to define the extension of "art." This vocabulary expresses senses that capture nongeneralizable features of the meaning of "art." They can be used in an explication of the term's semantics that would be expressed as a conjunction of topics each of which is expressed disjunctively. Lastly, the term "art" is significant because it presently excludes categories of items as categories of art. The hierarchies of terms beneath "art" are the dominant source of answers to important questions about its meaning, extension, and significance.