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Danto and Wittgenstein: Historicity, Essence and Generality

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Danto understands his core position that art has an essence that we can discover and define as a repudiation of the Wittgensteinian view that in some cases definitions may be distorting or so broad as to be nearly vacuous. Yet he is also deeply sympathetic to Wittgenstein's emphasis on the contextual and hence historical nature of language and other meaningful dimensions of human life. To understand the nature of their disagreement, we need to be clear about the agreement made explicit in Danto's later work: we need to understand how their shared historicism about the contextual nature of meaning divides into distinct approaches to the relationships between history, essence, and generality.

This overview is different from the standard narrative about the relationship between Danto's work and Wittgenstein's, which Danto avows. That narrative concerns Danto's response to the theoretical context of analytic philosophy of art in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the 1950s, neo-Wittgensteinians¹ extrapolated from Wittgenstein's work to deny that the concept of art can be defined in terms of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Critical debate ensued over their proposal that art is better understood in terms of sufficient conditions or relationships of similarities, which might be illustrated by Wittgenstein's example of family resemblances. But the critical debate misconstrued both the neo-Wittgensteinian proposals as well as Wittgenstein's text, so that Danto's response to this debate is not a good guide to his relationship with Wittgenstein. The problem is that the neo-Wittgensteinian position has been cast as arguing that the respects in which artworks are similar must be manifest, sensory or perceptual properties – that “the eye can de[s]cry,” as Danto famously put it.² Danto repeatedly argues that because an artwork might be indiscernible from a counterpart non-art object, what makes one an artwork are not its manifest features but that it

¹ Paul Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art,” *The Philosophical Review* 62 (1953): 58-78; Morris Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15(1956): 27-35; William E. Kennick “Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?” *Mind* 67 (1958): 317-334.

² Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1964): 571-584, p. 580: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry [sic] – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”

embodies and conveys a certain content. This is Danto's ontological point, but it brings historicism to art because meaning and embodiment are both tied to historical context: "Works are embodied meanings. What meanings are possible is a matter of historical contingency."³ This historically contextual analysis is a point of agreement rather than disagreement with Wittgenstein and the neo-Wittgensteinians.

Wittgenstein's work also needs to be disentangled from the standard narrative. The 'family resemblance' passages are but one strand in the *Philosophical Investigations's* attempt to re-orient philosophical focus away from the representational essence of language towards the diversity of uses of language in the context of human activities.⁴ The passages are not a self-standing nugget whose import can be understood independently of their place in these interweaving considerations, which go on to examine how our uses of language in 'language games' are both contextual and rule-informed.⁵ It is Wittgenstein's many stranded re-orientation to meaning as integral in language use that is relevant for Danto's focus on the meaningfulness of artworks.

This paper will proceed in three steps. The first section will reconstruct the neo-Wittgensteinian proposals and the second will re-examine the 'family resemblances' passages from the *Philosophical Investigations*. This makes it possible to take a fresh look at Danto's considered view in later works such as *After the End of Art*⁶ and its relationship to Wittgenstein's thought in the third and final section. Thirty years after his epiphany that the neo-Wittgensteinian view "was entirely wrong,"⁷ Danto chooses to explain the historically contextual nature of art in some of the same terms as Wittgenstein sketches for language. Yet disagreement over essence and definition remains. Danto argues that historicism and essentialism are "co-implicated" in art. The essence of art and the intension of the

³ Danto, "Replies" in *Danto and his Critics*, edited by Mark Rollins (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA : Blackwell, 1993; Chichester, West Sussex, UK ; Malden, MA : Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 2nd ed) p. 299.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Revised 4th Edn by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

⁵ For a recent discussion see Michael Forster, "Wittgenstein on Family Resemblance Concepts" in *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Arif Ahmed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶ Danto, *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

⁷ Danto, "Introduction: Art Criticism after the End of Art" in *Unnatural Wonders* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994) p. 8.

term can be specified by necessary and sufficient conditions – “eternally the same ... regardless of time and place” – even though realization of art’s essence changes historically and is “historically indexed.”⁸

I will argue that the deep innovation in Danto’s approach to art lies not so much in its contextual or relational nature as in its attempt to broker a compromise between essentialism and historicism: his essentialist definition allows for history’s role while keeping essence and contingency distinct. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s thought moves us towards the view that norm governed ‘wholes’ consisting of life activities and uses of language are bound to specific historical context so that a standard definition that leaves out the role of contingency would be distorting. This is the instructive impasse between Danto’s thought and Wittgenstein’s.

I Neo-Wittgensteinian Case against Definitions of Art

The neo-Wittgenstein view is typically reconstructed as a conjunction of two claims about the concept of art: (i) the concept is not definable; and (ii) it needs to be understood along the lines of Wittgenstein’s discussion of ‘family resemblances.’ The positive proposal is presented as claiming that artworks *resemble* one another like members of a family – they are similar in ways that are discernible or manifest, where none of these resemblances is necessary though they might provide sufficient conditions for art. Critics such as Maurice Mandelbaum and raconteurs of the debate such as Noel Carroll hold that the resembling features are manifest or decontextualized properties shared by individual works and paradigmatic ones.⁹ This is a point both about ontology, about the identity conditions of works of art, and about the epistemology or decision procedure concerning them – novel cases are adjudicated in terms of decontextualized similarities to paradigm cases.

To be clear that emphasis on visual similarities was no part of the neo-Wittgensteinian proposal, let’s go back to the three principal statements of the view.

⁸ Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense.” *Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography and After the End of Art. History and Theory, Theme Issue 37* (1998) 127-143, p. 128; “From Aesthetics to Art Criticism”, in *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, p. 95.

For Danto’s detailed discussion of this part of his view see “Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy” in *After the End of Art*, 193-219.

⁹ Maurice Mandelbaum, “Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1956): 219-228. Noel Carroll, “Introduction” *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

In 1953, Paul Ziff argues that works of art can be defined through “various subsets of a set of characteristics.” His view is that “a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is merely one kind of definition, one way of describing the use of a word or phrase” and that this type of definition is not appropriate for art since there are no necessary conditions for a work of art.¹⁰ But sufficient conditions may be gleaned by examining “clear cut” or “characteristic” cases of art works.

For example, Ziff suggests that someone in the West in the 1950’s would agree that a particular painting by Nicolas Poussin was a clear-cut case of a visual work, and that such a clear cut work has six conditions that are sufficient but not necessary. It is important to note that though Ziff considers similarities to a “clear-cut” case, he writes that this is to illustrate “in less exotic language” that a definition may offer only “subsets of characteristics” (rather than to suggest that artworks are determined by similarities to such cases). Consider three of the six conditions. A clear cut case of a visual work in the 1950’s might be:

- “intentionally and self-consciously made with skill”;
- intended to be treated as “works of art are customarily treated,” which includes attending to the “look and feel” as well as to the “expressive, significant, and symbolic aspect of the work,” to the “subject matter, ... the scene depicted, and to the interrelations between the formal structure and the scene depicted”;
- treated in such way.¹¹

Since a work might lack one or more of these features – for example, found objects may be artworks even though they lack intentional self-conscious production – the conditions are sufficient in a specific historical context but not necessary.

Ziff examines critical battles over post-impressionism to illustrate that assessing a work is always specific to a context and that debates about novel approaches are over the broader social consequences of accepting innovative works. Ziff contends that: “To ask ‘What are the consequences and implications of something’s being considered a work of art?’ is to ask an equivocal question to which there can be no univocal answer. We must first know in what context we are to suppose the phrase ‘work of art’ is being used.”¹² Because taking something to be a work of art has consequences

¹⁰ Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art,” 64.

¹¹ Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art,” 60-61. The other three characteristics are that a clear cut case is representational; has a complex formal structure; and is “good.”

¹² Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art,” 72.

for the larger functions of art in society, it is the larger context and what we take to be the purposes of art in that context that are at issue when we argue over “whether a particular use of the phrase ‘work of art’ is reasonable or not...”¹³

In 1956, Morris Weitz offers a different account of the way aesthetic theories have been misunderstood. The definitions such theories offer need to be understood as “summaries of seriously made recommendations to attend in certain ways to certain features of art.”¹⁴ Theories examine the reasons for excellence in art – such as “emotional depth, [or] profound truth” – to direct us to these characteristics. Disputes over the concept of art are not over the descriptive use of the concept but over the evaluative use since they propose criteria of artistic excellence that are perhaps overlooked or sidelined in a particular historical context.

Like Ziff, Weitz suggests that there are “strands of similarities” between different artworks which make it possible for us to recognize and understand them. But he does not suggest that there are definitions in terms of sufficient conditions. Weitz briefly points to the *Philosophical Investigations* to suggest that the model for the logical description of the “conditions under which we correctly use” the concept of art derives from Wittgenstein’s discussion of games in the family resemblance passages.

Unlike Ziff, Weitz offers a general reason for his view that is not specific to art: all empirically-descriptive and normative concepts allow for decisions about how to extend the use of the concept. That is, *all* concepts except those of logic and mathematics “which are constructed and completely defined” allow for the possibility of decisions about application. To illustrate that the logic of the concept of art is “open” Weitz considers the novel rather than visual art. He asks us to suppose that a new work “is narrative, fictional, contains character delineation and dialogue but (say) it has no regular time-sequence in the plot or is interspersed with actual newspaper reports.”¹⁵ This example shows how some conditions that one might think are important for a novel might be omitted and others that do not belong might be countenanced.

From our perspective, this list is important because if one were to extrapolate from Weitz’s discussion of novels to visual works, there is no ground for suggesting that the strands of similarities are manifest or simple perceptible features that one could just ‘look and see’ in the restricted sense

¹³ Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art,” 73.

¹⁴ Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” 35.

¹⁵ Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics” 31-22.

that the standard narrative maintains. The features of novels – such as narrative, fictionality, character delineation – are not manifest and restricted to a sensory faculty from which interpretation is distinct.

Finally, William Kennick argues in 1958 that in any specific historical context, people have the ability to recognize artworks though they may be stumped by strange or innovative cases. This is a competence in use that does not derive from grasping a nature common to works in different arts. Rather, the concept of art evolves historically with different uses and conditions of application in different historical contexts.

To show that our ability to identify artworks is a skillful competence, Kennick suggests that if one were asked to select only the artworks from a warehouse filled with works and diverse objects of other kinds, they would emerge with paintings, scripts, scores, recordings, novels, poems, and so forth. This argument seems to invite Danto's realization in front of Warhol's *Brillo Box* that the neo-Wittgensteinian view was "entirely wrong." Surely in 1964 one could not enter such a warehouse to re-emerge only with works of art.¹⁶

Yet Kennick's example needs to be treated with the historical specificity he advocates. Ordinary competence with artworks across the decades of the second half of the twentieth century would follow the changing nature of the works. Kennick and Danto can agree that ordinary competence or know-how would be in trouble with the works on offer from the visual and other arts in the 1960's. But Kennick's view allows that ordinary competence would come to include the fact that one cannot rely on an antecedent identity for artworks (which might be indiscernible from ordinary objects or movements or sounds, etc). By the 1980's, if one were asked to go into such a warehouse – which might include Warhol's *Brillo Box* and Fluxus collections of dime store items – one would respond that the task would not be feasible without labels or contextual clues; many artworks might not be identifiable by visual inspection alone.

Finally, like both Ziff and Weitz, Kennick proposes that aestheticians offer something of value even if they misunderstand their effort as proposing a definition. He suggests that we might "torture a phrase of Wittgenstein's"¹⁷ – of family resemblances – to recognize that aestheticians identify different

¹⁶ See Danto's discussion in "The World as Warehouse: Fluxus and Philosophy" in *Unnatural Wonders*, 333-347.

¹⁷ Kennick, "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" 323.

appreciative perspectives, which propose different ways of being interested in artworks and offer different reasons for valuing them.¹⁸

At least four key points are evident about the neo-Wittgenstein approach:

(1) Each theorist denies – making a universal negative claim – that artworks have a common nature or essence that can be defined in terms of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.

(2) None of the theorists argues that what is at issue are manifest, perceptible, sensory or even decontextualized properties that “the eye can descry.”

(3) Each theorist argues that proposed definitions of art make important contributions whose nature is misunderstood.

(4) Each theorist is circumspect in their use of the ‘family resemblance’ passages in Wittgenstein: Ziff leaves them unmentioned, Weitz brings up the example of games briefly, Kennick gestures with the caveat that doing so is “to torture a phrase of Wittgenstein’s.”

Throughout their discussions, each theorist emphasizes the contextual nature of uses of the concept of art. It cannot be fairly claimed that Danto’s emphasis on the contextual nature of visual art is a point of disagreement with the neo-Wittgensteinians.

2. Wittgenstein and the ‘family resemblance’ passages

Wittgenstein appeals to “different kinds of *affinity*” between “all that we call language” to help explain that we use the one concept without our diverse uses of language having “one thing in common.”¹⁹ He offers two further illustrative examples of concepts that apply to a group of diverse phenomena without a common essence: games and numbers. Wittgenstein writes, “Don’t say: ‘[Games] *must* have something in common, or they would not be called games’ – but ‘*look and see*’ whether there is anything common to all.” The invocation to “look and see” needs to be understood the way Wittgenstein uses this phrase in the *Philosophical Investigations* to make one of his key points: to

¹⁸ Kennick, “Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?” 323. For example, Kennick suggests that Clive Bell “had discovered something for himself. Not the essence of Art ... although he thought that this is what he found, but a new way of looking at pictures. ... ‘Art is Significant Form’ is a slogan, the epitome of a platform of aesthetic reform. It has work to do. Not the work which the philosophers assign it, but a work of teaching people *a new way of looking at pictures.*” 325.

¹⁹ *Philosophical Investigations* §65.

enjoin us to examine specific cases rather than to abstract from them for certain kinds of theory formation that treat detail much like the ‘noise’ that obstructs an informational signal. That Wittgensteinian is not enjoining us to focus on simple manifest properties is borne out by the subsequent list of features of games – such as winning or losing, competition, or the roles of skill or luck. The point of ‘looking and seeing’ particular cases is that “we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small.”

Wittgenstein briefly invokes resemblances among family members to characterize such networks of overlapping similarities and immediately proceeds to apply the idea to numbers. Here is the key transition in full.

PI 67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family – build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.

And likewise the kinds of number, for example, form a family. Why do we call something a “number”? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – affinity with several things that have hitherto been called “number”; and this can be said to give it an indirect affinity with other things that we also call “numbers.” And we extend our concept of number, as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

Wittgenstein suggests that “the kinds of number” “form a family.” Yet no one could suppose that “kinds of number” are determined by the perceptible properties of numerals, which would be analogous to the eye colour or gait of family members. The passage proceeds from the illustrative example of resemblances between family members – which is the focus of criticism – to similarities among kinds of number – about which there is a resounding silence in philosophy of art since it does not fit the standard narrative about neo-Wittgensteinian proposals. It does not fit the script that Wittgenstein suggests that there are family resemblance concepts determined by manifest similarities to prototypes.²⁰

²⁰ Though this part of the standard narrative is not part of my focus, it is important to note that there is no mention of prototypes; Wittgenstein writes that the concept of number holds together through the overlapping of many fibers.

Wittgenstein's suggestion that "we call something a 'number' ... because it has a – direct – affinity with several things that have hitherto been called 'number'" needs to be understood in relation to the preceding sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which introduce the notion of language-games to highlight the interdependence between what we can say and what we can do in evolving historical and natural circumstances. As he writes at *PI* §7: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a 'language-game.'" His view is that to examine all that we call 'number' we need to examine the "wholes" in which uses of numbers figures. The relationships at issue concern what we can do with numbers in practices that involve numbers. Since the injunction to "look and see" continues to apply, we are being enjoined to look and see what we actually do with numbers in our life activities.

3. Danto and Wittgenstein's views of historical human kinds

Setting aside the mistaken view that a Wittgensteinian approach restricts us to manifest, sensory, perceptible or decontextualized properties allows us to take a fresh look at the relationship between Danto and Wittgenstein. First, we need to re-consider whether Wittgenstein's worries about generality raise concerns for Danto's approach. Second, I will focus on their views of historicity – of art and of language uses.

3.1 Wittgenstein worries that when it comes to the diverse uses of language, subsuming the variety in terms of a shared essence may be (i) distorting; and (ii) nearly vacuous without specification of diverse cases.

Wittgenstein's first worry is illustrated by the suggestion that "All tools serve to modify something," which assimilates all tools, even those where the claim does not seem apt to those where it does. *PI* §14 ... "What is modified by a rule, a glue-pot and nails? – "Our knowledge of a thing's length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of a box." – Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions? –

Danto is confident that his definition avoids such mis-assimilation because embodiment of meaning is both sufficiently *general* to capture all art without distortion and can be *narrowed* down without distorting assimilations. On one hand, it seems safe to say that all artworks convey something

by means of their embodiment. On the other hand, Danto is enthusiastic that Noel Carroll draws out two further necessary conditions that he had not himself explicitly recognized: that artworks have content by offering a point of view and that this point of view is offered through metaphorical ellipsis.²¹

Yet these additional conditions render Danto's theory a form of expressivism, so that his definition of art becomes more restrictive and vulnerable to counterexamples, just as Carroll argues. This may be the reason why in subsequent works Danto writes that he has hit upon only two core conditions of the concept of art – embodiment and meaning. He likens his proposal to Plato's discovery that knowledge is true belief, which puts us on the right track though it leaves the justification condition outstanding.²² Yet Danto's analogy is not without its own difficulties. Emphasis on belief may be distorting, for example it leaves 'knowing how' out of consideration.

Conceptual art seems to challenge Danto's confidence that the two core conditions of his definition are sufficiently general. This is because some works do away with an object altogether in favour of a brief linguistic text whose embodiment is insignificant to its meaning. Does Danto's proposal that artworks embody meanings mis-asimilate conceptual art's attempt to de-emphasize embodiment?²³ Would it be more helpful to understand conceptual art along the lines suggested by the neo-Wittgensteinians: such artworks try to change our view of art's purpose in society, to shift focus from embodiment to meaning as a criterion of excellence, or to teach us a new way of attending to works?

Wittgenstein's second worry is that in some cases, a sufficiently general definition of a highly diverse category would be almost uninformative without further specification of the differences among its members.²⁴ Here, Wittgenstein's illustrative example is handles – which look "more or less alike" "since they are supposed to be handled," but which need to be "handled" differently to be

²¹ Carroll, "Essence, Expression, and History" 118-145 and Danto, "Replies to Essays" 285-311, especially 300-301 in *Danto and his Critics* (2nd ed.)

²² Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense." *Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography and After the End of Art. History and Theory, Theme Issue 37* (1998) 127-143, p. 130.

²³ Danto's art criticism is telling in the joy it takes in conceptual works that involve interesting embodiments, such as 'snap line' wall drawings made by others from Sol LeWitt's instructions. Danto, "Sol LeWitt" in *Unnatural Wonders*, 93-100.

²⁴ PI §12.

understood: pulled or pumped or switched from one position to another to perform different functions. This brings us closer to the heart of Danto and Wittgenstein's disagreement.

3.2 Danto's considered view is that the diversity of art is a matter of the historicity of both meaning and embodiment.²⁵ His richly illustrative writing allows us to 'handle the handles' as it were, to countenance the diversity of artworks in terms of what they convey and how they do so. Danto increasingly recognizes that Wittgenstein's view is deeply historical in its emphasis that language use is integral to human life activities. In *After the End of Art*, he chooses Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life" to explain the historical nature of both embodiment and meaning in art. Quoting from PI §19, "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life," Danto draws an explicit analogy: "the same thing must be said about art: to imagine a work of art is to imagine a form of life in which it plays a role."²⁶

His point is that Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life" explains two key respects in which art is historical. First, embodiment and content are integral to a particular form of life. Second and more specifically, artworks are bound to particular historical contexts where embodied meanings can be "lived" rather than merely "known about" in an "altogether external" way "unless and until we can find a way of fitting it into our form of life". Here is one illustration:

The art of the Counter-Reformation had as its charge ... that [viewers] had not merely to see that there was suffering, not merely to infer that someone in the situations depicted would in fact suffer: they had to feel the suffering. And ways had to be found to convey this ... by means of paint and carving. But once the stylistic strategies of the baroque had evolved, they could be put to different uses – to cause viewers to feel, for example, ... the cool slickness of a satin garment. And so the imperatives to which Bernini's art was a response allowed Terborch to say things inaccessible to a "liner" artist who may not even have entertained the thoughts that such things *could* be said. There is a philosophically instructive asymmetry in thinking of the way in which sixteenth-century artists could not

²⁵ Danto's view of the way in which historical understanding enters into artworks evolves from his initial suggestion artworks depend on art historical theory to *be* the kind of entity that they are (so that this might a third necessary condition in addition to meaning and embodiment), to his considered view that it meaning and embodiment both involve historical context, which I focus on here.

²⁶ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 202.

so much as conceive of expressing certain things in art that really required the painterly vocabulary of the baroque style, and in thinking how a baroque artist would be frustrated were he obliged to try to say whatever he had to say in the linear style of his immediate predecessors.²⁷

Yet Danto's sympathy with Wittgenstein's contextual approach leaves room for disagreement over essence and definition. Danto proposes that historicism and essentialism are co-implicated in art. Artworks have an essence *and* they are historically indexed: "The concept of art, as essentialist, is timeless. But the extension of the term is historically indexed – it really reveals itself through history..."²⁸ This means that artworks may be defined – the conditions that artworks are embodiments of meaning give the intension of the term or its meaning – while as a matter of fact, the extension of the term, the things it applies to, varies with historical change: "History belongs to the extension rather than the intension of the concept of art..."²⁹

Danto holds more generally that there are concepts with historical extensions; art is one such concept among others. Gender or racial concepts also have complex histories because what counts as being 'fitting or appropriate' "varies sharply from period to period and place to place." To elaborate this view and to defend his approach from the "polemicization" of the notion of essence, Danto attempts to resolve criticisms of essentialism in debates over gender and race. These debates turn on an unfortunate misunderstanding, he suggests, since essence in these cases is compatible with whatever traits are historically extant as a matter of fact.³⁰ The kind 'woman' has a definable essence – presumably in biological or genetic terms – *and* the realization of that essence differs in different historical contexts. "[E]ssentialism ... entails pluralism, whether pluralism in fact is historically realized or not."³¹

²⁷ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 200-201. Danto's point is similar to Ziff's about the historical evolution of the ends and means of art. Ziff argues that as society changes, new means are developed in art which will make new ends possible, and there will be new ends for art that require new means. See especially pp. 74-76.

²⁸ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 196.

²⁹ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 196.

³⁰ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 197.

³¹ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 197.

But the rejoinder would be that dispute over racial and gender kinds extends to the question whether biology determines what it is to be a woman even if we recognize that historical realization of a biological kind may change. To show how one may broker a compromise – an essence ‘eternally the same ... regardless of time and place’³² that is realized differently across historical contexts – does not address the substantive issue whether what it is to be a woman is determined by historical norms that take biology into account.

Wittgenstein’s investigations of the historically evolving nature of language games incline us to question the assumption that, in all such cases, historical diversity can be explained in terms of an essence. In so doing, they come together with the way Danto’s approach helps to crystallize the issue: do historical differences lie in how art is realized in different times and places or does “all that we call” art change with historical norms?

Danto’s proposal to split the essence of art from its historical extension holds firm to a distinction between what is essential and what is contingent. As he puts it, recognizing that historical kinds have both definable conditions and historically changing extension “means ... that the essence cannot contain anything that is historically or culturally contingent.”³³ Commitment to this distinction undergirds and informs his approach. This is where his deep disagreement with Wittgenstein lies.

Thinking about language, Wittgenstein submits that our ways of living in the world may change so that an entirely new kind of sentence or use of language might be possible.³⁴ This is because norm-governed use changes in ways specifically bound to ways of living and historical circumstances. Wittgenstein’s game analogy – for language use or norm-governed activities more generally – directs us to other potentially relevant subjects, such as the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules individuate different games, such as chess or go, and the force of constitutive

³² Danto, “From Aesthetics to Art Criticism”, 95. From this it follows that definition would be “always and everywhere true,” Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense” 128.

³³ Danto, “Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy” in *After the End of Art*, 197.

³⁴ See especially *PI* sections 18 and 23. Section 18 questions the idea that our natural language might be “complete” – “before or after the symbolism of chemistry or the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated into it”? Section 23 examines the diversity of language uses or kinds of sentence with a long list of examples that show that “this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all, but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)” Wittgenstein emphasizes here that “The word ‘language-*game*’ is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. ...”

rules is specific to a game. This suggests that human life activities may be governed by constitutive norms that are specifically bound to the activity and its context.³⁵ Insofar as (i) norms play a constitutive role in an activity and (ii) norms are bound to historical circumstances; historical contingencies *enter into* the constitutive conditions of the activity and the entities it involves -- such as Baroque art in Danto's example -- rather than being *distinct from* the timeless essence in its historical realization.

Wittgenstein's notion of 'language-games,' together with his extensive investigations of rules, highlights the absence of explicit consideration of norms in Danto's work. Danto stays firmly committed to writing about the conditions of art rather than its norms. His focus is understandable from a historical perspective. In the 1960s, Danto conceives his view of art in the terms extant in that historical context, where theorists of modern art had tried to explain art's nature in an inclusive way and neo-Wittgensteinians had denied the possibility of a general definition. It was not until the 1980s that the floodgates would open to extensive discussion of Wittgenstein's 'rule-following considerations' in philosophy of language and mind. By this point, the narrative about theories of art had largely set without showing signs that discussions of rule-following in philosophy of language and mind might be pertinent.

Nevertheless, if one were to ask Danto how he envisions the role of norms in art, I think he would have a ready answer: norms are part of the historical conditions for how art is realized. The essence of art contains no 'whiff of contingency' while the role of norms is allocated to the contingent conditions for the extension but not the intension of the concept of art. This seems clear from his discussion of womankind, where he writes that "what counts as fitting for women" varies historically, so that "essentialism here, as elsewhere, entails a pluralism of gender traits, male and female, leaving it a matter of social or moral policy which if any traits to incorporate into the ideals that go with gender. These will not be a part of the essence for obvious reasons, for what belongs to essences, in art or in gender, has nothing to do with social or moral policy."³⁶

This is the crux of the disagreement between Danto and Wittgenstein's later thought. It yields hard questions about *historicism* in art. How should we understand the role of norms in the diversity

³⁵ A significant point of disanalogy is that human activities, including uses of language are not closed systems like games, so that one needs to take their evolving nature into account.

³⁶ Danto, "Modalities of History: Possibility and Comedy" in *After the End of Art*, 197.

of art? As constitutive and bound to specific historical, contingent contexts? Or as part of the contingent conditions for the realization of art's timeless essence?