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Reply to Robert Stecker on Art

I shall be somewhat selective in my comments on Stecker, just picking up on a few representative issues.

(A) Stecker's initial 'problem' with the Aesthetic Creation Theory is no problem at all. His example is of a person, who is said to be an 'artist', who applies paint to canvas, and then later 'sees that it has certain aesthetic properties'. But the example is under-described. Describing the person as an 'artist' hints at his intentions, but otherwise all we know is that a person applied paint to canvas and we are not told anything about his intentions or motives. Perhaps the canvas has an insect infestation or has gone moldy, and the point of the paint was to cure the problem. (This could be true even if he is an 'artist'.) If the result is aesthetically interesting, it is no more art than the results of any activity that happens to have aesthetically interesting consequences that were not aimed at. Some pollution produces aesthetically interesting results. Similarly if someone steps on an insect or shoots someone, that may have aesthetically interesting results. Stecker may, however, have in mind an artist who has indeterminate aesthetic intentions, and who is experimenting with applying paint to canvas. But indeterminate aesthetic properties are still aesthetic properties, and those indeterminate properties can figure in the content of intentions and insights. The consequences may well be art. It is difficult to tell what Stecker means, since the example is underdescribed. Clearly, though, there is no need for any modification.

(B) Stecker worries about extensional adequacy. He suggests that most narratives are not art on the Aesthetic Creation Theory. But many are, for they have a significant aesthetic point as well as appealing to the imagination. Nevertheless, I do think that there are *some* pure narratives that should be excluded from art status. Stecker also suggests either that the ordinary concept of art is disjunctive or that I think that it is. But it is surely unlikely that it is. We do have some disjunctive functional concepts, such as the concept of a sofa-bed, camera-phone, radio-cassette, coffeemaker-alarm clock. But these are special cases.

(C) On the project of defining art, my view is that all definitions of art are bad. Nothing could count as success at that project. Imagine a debate about what colour prime numbers are. Some say that prime numbers are all red. Others reply, No, there are counterexamples, some are blue! Others put forward the yellow theory of prime numbers. The whole intellectual endeavor needs critiquing. Similarly with defining art.

(D) As an antidote to my skepticism about whether non-philosophers have the notion of art that figures in recent aesthetics Stecker describes teaching his students (which is an odd source of neutral data!). Apparently he asks his students to categorize objects as art or not; and he starts by giving them 18th century fine art (presumably paintings), followed by photographs and cinema, and then some avant garde visual artworks, and furniture, carpets and jewelry, which the students are said to be divided over. But the very scenario that Stecker describes confirms my diagnosis. For the examples that Stecker gives his students are all from the visual arts. He did not play them some music or read a poem and ask the students if that was art. If he had, the students would probably have replied, "No, that's not art, it's music" or "No, that's not art, it's poetry". It is this wider more embracing notion that the students are unlikely to have. It is an illusion to think that many folk have this wider notion as their folk notion, which is the one pursued in various philosophical analyses of the concept. That concept is typically one that the students only acquire in aesthetics **classes after** indoctrination, I would say. (Incidentally, English dictionaries that do not record the philosophical notion as a meaning of "art" include the Penguin, Longman and Collins English dictionaries, while the Oxford English dictionary does record it.)

(E) Stecker wants me to say more about why I think we should have one theory of both the nature of art and also of its value (he talks of 'classification' and 'evaluation'). Actually, I said quite a lot about this in the book. But the short answer is that the fact that two theoretically projects are linked falls out of the functionality of art (see chapter 1). Any artifact has essential normative properties; natures and norms go together. The same goes for artistic artifacts.

(F) As a consideration in favour of separating these tasks, Stecker argues that we can only explain our valuing art if art is what falls under the philosophical concept of art. I could not follow this. There are a variety of human activities that we may try to understand. How we type those activities is not given in advance of theory. We have to see how best to impose explanatory order. I cannot see why we need to be bound by some arcane philosophical conception of art or by the folk concept of art any more than we need be bound to deploy the concepts of astrology in explaining human action. Stecker's argument would provide a novel defense for the devotees of astrology, who could deny that human behavior can be

explained if it does not respect folk astrological categorizations of behavior, such as that someone is a Scorpio or a Libra. They might protest like Stecker “an explanatory theory must have a target!”

(G) Stecker discusses the view that all artistic value is aesthetic value. He also discusses some avant garde works. Here he seemed to be playing the game of definition and counterexample, an activity I critique. I did not see the role of this discussion. My account foregrounds aesthetic functions, not aesthetic values as such, which makes a considerable difference. To give one example, it makes a difference to second-order accounts of artistic appropriation. For where one function of a thing depends on another, the other function persists. So an aesthetic function is part of the identity of a work that appropriates an aesthetic work. Stecker also discusses aesthetic experience accounts of art. But mine is not such an account, so I pass over that material.

(H) Stecker discusses a replaceability argument that I run at one point (along with others) against theories of art according to which artworks convey truths or emotions. Stecker objects that the same objection threatens aesthetic accounts of art, since nature also possess aesthetic values. The reply is that nature may possess aesthetic values but not the very same ones that most artworks possess.

(J) I end my comments on Stecker by voicing a suspicion, which is that, despite my repeating protestations, Stecker thinks that really, deep-down, I am trying to ‘define art’, and that really, deep-down, I think that that all artistic values or purposes are aesthetic. I have been pleased to find that many readers understand my attempt to reflect on art in a different way from the standard paradigm of the last forty years. But perhaps if one is very comfortable in a paradigm, then one will not recognize the existence of the point from which it is criticized, and there will be a tendency to assimilate views to ones that neatly map on to those that are familiar in the paradigm, and for which there is a standardly accepted dialectical scenario.