**Still an Error: Relational Theories of Art**

In our 2012 paper,[[1]](#footnote-1) we offered a critique of relational theories of art, comparing them unfavourably to family resemblance accounts. Our paradigm examples of relational theories were Maurice Mandelbaum’s (an artwork is something ‘created by someone for some actual or possible audience’[[2]](#footnote-2)) and George Dickie’s (‘A work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public’[[3]](#footnote-3)). We called these positions ‘theories’ because they offer to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions of something’s counting as art: here we were following Morris Weitz, with whom we began our paper, and in reaction against whom relational theorizing about art itself began.[[4]](#footnote-4) And we called them ‘relational’ theories because the conditions that they specify refer exclusively to the relational properties of the objects in question. Any theory of art that specifies conditions referring to a mixture of relational and non-relational properties was therefore not a relational theory of art as we understood that term, and so was not a part of the target that our critique was directed against.

In their response to our paper, Aaron Meskin and Simon Fokt seem not to have fully appreciated this. As a would-be corrective to us, they describe and commend a theory of art that combines ‘“weak proceduralism” (the view that ... satisfying [an] institutional [i.e. a relational] condition is necessary for acquiring art status)’[[5]](#footnote-5) with the requirement that ‘artworld members have good reasons to justify’ presenting their artifacts ‘to the artworld’,[[6]](#footnote-6) where these reasons refer to such non-relational properties as ‘*beautifully and faithfully representing*’ some particular subject matter.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such a theory is therefore not, in our sense, a relational theory of art.

More puzzling, though, is the fact that the position that they describe does appear to be a family resemblance account. Whereas ‘weak proceduralism’ states a (merely) necessary condition of something’s counting as art – a condition that we described as a ‘platitude’, one ‘wholly compatible with the claim that art is ... a family resemblance concept’[[8]](#footnote-8) – the requirement concerning reasons is not merely compatible with the family resemblance account, but can only be understood as a version of it. For these ‘good reasons’ will exhibit among themselves only that ‘complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing’ that family resemblances consist in.[[9]](#footnote-9) And, more puzzlingly still, Meskin and Fokt seem actually to agree with this. They explicitly connect the reasons requirement that they describe to Berys Gaut’s ‘cluster account’ of art,[[10]](#footnote-10) an account that Gaut himself regards as an update to the family resemblance account[[11]](#footnote-11) and which we referred to supportively and under that head in our opening pages.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So what has gone wrong with Meskin and Fokt’s reply to us? They make two mistakes, one global, the other local.

The global mistake is to imagine that Weitz (or we) would regard as a ‘theory’ of art an account that specifies as necessary and sufficient conditions a platitude plus a condition that can only be cashed out as referring to a family resemblance concept – in this case the concept of a good reason. If it were *that* easy, we’d scarcely have bothered to write our paper in the first place. (And Weitz – or indeed Wittgenstein – would already have had his ‘theory’ for free.)

The other mistake, which may perhaps have led them to make the first, is that they misunderstand the falsification conditions of a statement to the effect that such-and-such is a family resemblance concept.

Our claim was this. When something appears to be a family resemblance concept – i.e. can plausibly be identified as such – this identification may well survive the discovery of a feature that all of the objects referred to by that concept have in common. For this feature may be incidental, in the sense that it fails to account for the *unity* of the concept – for the fact, as we put it, that we have *a* concept of such-and-such ‘rather than just a rag-bag of homophonous uses.’ So, we said, if one wants to show that something isn’t the family resemblance concept that it appears to be, one must both discover a common feature *and* show ‘how that feature is responsible for [i.e. explains] the patterns of similarity’ to which the proponent of the family resemblance account appeals, otherwise the unity of the relevant concept will not have been established *except* by pointing to the resemblances that the items referred to by that concept exhibit among themselves. We called this the ‘explanatory requirement.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

Meskin and Fokt wish to reject this requirement. Their attempt to do so, however, is unconvincing. They argue that the relational feature that all of those who have been, say, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southampton share – namely, having been appointed by University Council – need not account for any (further) similarities that those individuals might happen to exhibit to one another.[[14]](#footnote-14) Which is of course true. But this is because the concept ‘Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southampton’ is very obviously a relational or institutional concept, from top to bottom. The unity of the concept is secured, precisely, by the relational feature that all vice-chancellors of that university share (and so there is no further explanatory work that that feature is called upon to do). Whereas, when the concept in question is apparently a family resemblance one – as nobody, including Meskin and Fokt,[[15]](#footnote-15) would think was true of ‘Vice-Chancellor of the University of Southampton’ – the task for the would-be ‘theorist’ is to show that the similarities that the proponent of the family resemblance account appeals to are in fact *explicable* by reference to the common feature that he or she has discovered. The ‘theorist’s task, in short, is to establish the unity of a concept that had appeared to be held together merely by patterns of criss-crossing similarity, etc., in some other way – a way that *explains* how those patterns are only, as it were, the surface symptoms of a unity that cuts deeper.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Meskin and Fokt seem to have missed our point here, which may have contributed to their making the global mistake that we referred to a moment ago, and may explain the puzzling features of their response to us that we have detailed above. As far as we can see, then, our case against relational theories of art – which we haven’t rehearsed here – stands.

1. Neill and Ridley, ‘Relational Theories of Art: the History of an Error’, *BJA* 52 (2012), 141-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mandelbaum, ‘Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), 219-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dickie, *Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Weitz, ‘The Role of Theory in Aesthetics’, *JAAC* 15 (1956), 27-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Meskin and Fokt, ‘Errors in “The History of an Error”’, *BJA* x (2016), 9. The idea of ‘weak proceduralism’ is taken from Derek Matravers, ‘The Institutional Theory: A Protean Creature’, *BJA* 40 (2000), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Meskin and Fokt *op. cit*., p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *ibid*. Italics in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Neill and Ridley, *op. cit.*, p.147. ‘It cannot be controversial,’ we said, ‘to say that ... artworks depend for their possibility on a rich context or background of practices, institutions, histories and what have you ... [Indeed one might say] that it is *of the very nature* of artworks that they be related to these relata’ (pp.146-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), §66. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Meskin and Fokt, *op. cit*.,p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gaut, ‘“Art” as a Cluster Concept’, in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 25-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Neill and Ridley, *op. cit.*, pp.142-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *ibid*., pp. 145-6, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Meskin and Fokt, *op. cit.*, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. They make this clear: *ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We thought that we had underlined this point in our remark about H2O: see Neill and Ridley, *op. cit.*, p.146, n.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)