

ART HISTORY?

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ABSTRACT

This article is presented in two parts. In part I, I call into question the viability of a currently received opinion about the foundations of the subject called “Art History,” primarily by challenging assumptions that are implicit in conventional uses of the terms “art” and “work of art.” It is widely supposed that works of art are items of a kind, that this kind is the bearer of the name “art,” and that it has a history. In part II, I propose to correct this error by using the word “art” in a presently unconventional—although not unprecedented—way. The proposal relies upon a concept of cultural evolution running intellectually parallel to a Darwinian account of genetic evolution. The thesis has strong metaphysical-realist implications, relating cultural evolution to what can be said and done and can properly be seen to have a history only in a universe to which real regularities are attributed. The recommended use of the term “art” is secured upon an estimate of the role of memetic innovation as radically pervasive, embracing all thought and action. “Art,” understood in the suggested way, becomes the name of a category, which has no history as kinds have histories.

I. ON THE INFIRMITY OF ART HISTORY¹*Introduction*

To the extent that, wittingly or unwittingly, art historians make one or more of three related mistakes their practice must be unsound. The first of these is that “art” is the name of a kind, of which works of art are the items. The second is that this putative kind has a history. The third is that the history of this kind is shaped quite differently from the way in which the generality of cultural kinds, including such kinds as the clock and the washing machine, are shaped. To the extent that “art historians” take themselves to be *cultural* historians with a topic preference for such kinds as Etruscan terracottas and medieval stained glass windows, they may be blameless.

It will be argued that among all the sorts of things, *kinds* are distinctive, differing profoundly from other sorts.² From the account given of kinds, two impor-

1. Some of the points developed in this paper were first made in my “Art and History,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), 331-340. Others had already received a tentative airing in “The Undoing of Art History,” *Artlink* (Australia) 21 (2001), 66-69 and 22 (2002), 70-73.

2. I use “sorts” as the most general of terms for collectives and non-particulars. Thus heaps and herds and residues are sorts, and so are classes and types and universals; so that while kinds are formally countable among the sorts it will be convenient to speak of kinds in contrast with all (other) sorts. Strings of disjuncts are tedious, and to summarize all (other) sorts as “not-kinds” would be intolerable.

tant consequences flow. One is that kinds are the only sorts that can properly be considered to have histories; and the other is that because “art” (as the word is conventionally used) does not name a kind it does not name a kind with a history. “Art history” is an oxymoron.

In reaching these conclusions an intellectual parallel is drawn with the way in which evolutionary biology has been theorized. However, the use that I make of the Darwinian model is strictly analogical: my thesis is not sociobiological, nor is it—to take a linguistic liberty—culturo-biological; although I suppose that a few exceptionally durable cultural kinds such as the eyebrow-flash of recognition may well feed in to the genetic hard-wiring of a species.

The claim that the word “art” does not name a kind and that the phrase “art history” is therefore incoherent is too drastically counterintuitive to assert—no matter how justifiably—and leave hanging, taking no account of its consequences. The second part of the essay conscientiously strives to save the word “art” (and, in a different way, the phrase “work of art”) from ignominy by proposing alternative uses that are supportable upon definitions that do not stray too far outside the scope of ordinary language.

What kinds are, and why they have histories

Unquestionably, and in spite of the fact that “art” is not the name of one of them, there *are* kinds, and they have histories. But to uncover the solid foundations of this opinion some spadework must be done.

In ordinary conversation as well as in most academic discourse it seems to be imperfectly recognized, or not to be recognized at all, that histories cannot be attributed to particulars and to sorts merely because they persist and change. It is trivially true that such a particular as an apple and such a sort as a bundle emerges, endures for longer or shorter periods, changes in appearance and constitution, and finally disappears. Countless stories can be told about the temporal vicissitudes of things, some of them with a claim to objectivity and even truth, despite the abhorrence with which this word is met by radical relativists. Most historians—including reckless relativists—still rely heavily for their credibility upon common sense appeals to factuality. Few consider how much more than temporal persistence is required of an entity about which it is their ambition not merely to tell a story—whether true or merely persuasive—but to uncover *the history*.

I suggest that the first move on the way to a history entails a restriction of the range of subjects of inquiry to entities that are not merely persistent but are also neither particulars nor sorts of particulars, in an unrestricted sense of “sorts.” The only proper subjects of historical inquiry are kinds. It is the remarkable peculiarity of kinds that they alone can intelligibly be said to have histories. The duty of the historian is to explain how and why it was that each *kind* emerged as a distinct kind; how and why it changed as a kind; and finally (in appropriate cases) how and why it disappeared.

It should be noticed that kinds differ from the items of which they are constituted in that their items do *not* have histories. The bicycle is a cultural kind of

which there is unquestionably a history. An item of the bicycle kind may be stolen (as De Sica famously observed) and all of its encounters, however trivial, may inspire a storyteller; but these events are generally of no professional concern to the historian. It is the kind, “the bicycle,” that is of interest. (Although this is not to deny that a remarkable bicycle may throw light upon the history of its kind.) Despite the fact that it is implicitly acknowledged by all those historians who speak naturally of the *biography* of Napoleon in contrast with the history of the French revolution, the essentially historical nature of kinds, in complementarity with their items, has not been emphasized in theories of history. It is more explicitly acknowledged by biological historians, who speak of the history of the human kind, but only of the historical *role* of such individuals as the mitochondrial Eve.

The word “kind” is very carelessly used in ordinary conversation. Items of all sorts are casually referred to as being of a kind if they show almost any similarity or range of similarities, one to another. Ordinary talk sheds little light upon the deep issue of kindedness. This is to be regretted, for while a suitable technical expression might have been devised to encapsulate the precise distinctions that are needed, the fact is that the most appropriate alternative to the carelessly used word “kind” is the orthographically similar word, used as it should be used if only we were more deliberate speakers. A careful user should take more account of the hints that are scattered throughout the cognate semantic regions of “kith,” “kin,” “kindred,” and “kinship.” A biological example may clarify the point. “Sparrow” is the common name given to the avian kind of which each sparrow is an item. We identify an item as a sparrow by attending to those formal and functional characteristics that are shared by sparrows and are, taken together, conveniently regarded as distinctive: details of anatomical structure, size, coloring, mating and territorial behaviors, migratory patterns, and so forth. Many of these characteristics are considered to be merely indicative; although some loosely appropriated combination of them is often treated—for instance, in bird-watchers’ guidebooks—as if it were definitive.

Should the identification of a thing as an item of the sparrow kind be challenged, and should an appeal to the ornithological authorities for a more refined specification still be inconclusive, a deeper issue must be canvassed. This issue is occasionally overlooked even in biology, and it is totally neglected in the domain of kindedness that vitally concerns the cultural historian.³ We require of the items of a kind—as we do not require of the items of other sorts—that they shall owe their shared kindedness not to accident (as things of the green sort are accidentally green); not to stipulation (as fruits of the forbidden sort are tainted by virtue of some taboo); and indeed not to any cause or reason other than the pervasive influence of what might be called a *generative principle of kindedness*.

To be more specific: for items of all of the biological kinds, among which the sparrow is presently exemplary, the relevant generative principle of kindedness is primarily the replication of parental DNA, abetted by an adaptive process that

3. “Kindedness” is admittedly an awkward coinage. Unfortunately, despite the etymological link, the more attractive term “kindness” does not clearly signify “being of a kind” and “kinship” has been appropriated by anthropologists for a different purpose.

is responsive over time to the constraints of the environment. To count decisively as an item of the sparrow kind a candidate must not only share significant formal and functional characteristics with other sparrows; its display of these characteristics must be also be attributable to the operation of a generative principle that might be succinctly expressed by saying about it that it was “born of sparrows.” We do not yet know whether it is possible to generate an organism having all the distinguishing characteristics of an item of the sparrow kind by combining chemicals taken from bottles on a shelf, but we can be sure that if such an enterprise were to succeed the resultant golem would have to count as a “sparrow” of a different kind from the evolved and evolving creatures that we ordinarily notice in the garden. In a similar way artificial pearls, even if they are cultured, are counted items of a different kind from natural pearls.⁴ The fact—if it ever is a fact—about two items that one “can’t tell them apart” by any formal or functional test will ordinarily be highly suggestive about their kindedness, but it will never be decisive. The recognition of a consistently influential generative principle of kindedness operating in an evolutionary way supplies the principled means by which we might, with care, avoid conflating the allocation of an item to its kind with the quite different procedure of allocating a member to its class, or a token to its type, or an item to a bundle. Of course, the practical assignment of items to aggregations such as crowds and heaps makes no appeal at all to any ongoing generative principle.

It is just because kinds are shaped in an evolutionary way by a generative principle of kindedness that we are able to conceive of them as having histories and not merely as subject to those more or less random vicissitudes dealt by fate that are so attractive to storytellers. Moreover, the cultural historian, like the biological historian, should be conscious of a responsibility that is not borne by the casual chronicler or storyteller. It is a responsibility to explain persuasively, and in the ideal case to explain correctly, how it was that a given kind emerged into the world, underwent modification, and fell eventually into extinction. Biological kinds such as the sparrow and cultural kinds such as the bicycle owe their histories not merely to the passage of time and the buffeting of circumstance but to the ongoing influence of a generative principle of kindedness. Properly understood the cultural historian’s theoretical task, prior to any practical inquiry, is to establish what generative principle of kindedness it is that exerts itself in reality upon the subject of investigation and is—once grasped—comparable in its explanatory power to the Darwinian generative principle of biological kindedness. Manifestly, the biological and the cultural generative principles cannot both draw upon the replication of DNA. This much is obvious, and the point will be elaborated shortly; but it may first be worth remarking—although incidentally, because the case that I make against a history of art does not turn upon it—that there are perhaps as few as three fundamentally different sorts of kinds. There are natural, non-biological and non-cultural kinds such as

4. It is for just this reason that Dolly the cloned sheep was not considered to be an item of the same kind as the ordinary farm animal, but of a kind that raises quite new and differently serious practical and economic as well as ethical and moral questions.

gold and water.⁵ There are biological kinds such as the oak tree and the sparrow. And finally, there are cultural kinds such as the continental breakfast, the democratic process, and the cast-iron balcony.

Historians who devote their attention to the study of biological kinds respond to their challenge by showing how successive items of each kind, each of which is like (but not exactly like) its parents by virtue of the slightly imperfect replication of DNA, have been subjected to environmental pressures, and how these pressures have led to variation in the species and, eventually, to distinct speciation. What were originally clear and continuous genealogical lines shift into divergent paths. New kinds have emerged, no longer breeding from items of the kind to which their ancestral parents belonged. The history of the sparrow is an intelligible explanatory account of the way in which the biological generative principle of kindness—that is to say, genetic replication and environmental adaptation—has projected more and less faithful replicas of items of an unspectacular brown finch kind into more and less favorable contexts with more and less momentous consequences. Such accounts are neither descriptive chronicles nor stories, nor even true stories. They are *histories*, of which—unless there has been a parallel evolution—there will generally be just one to be discovered for each kind. A rise in the ocean temperature, for example, does not earn its historical significance as an incident in the history of coral because of historians' taste or distaste for warm water, or their commitment to an attitude on questions of nature conservation. Such an event is critical in the history of the coral kind *tout court*. Extinction may be on the way.

Cultural kindness and the engine of imitation

We should therefore ask ourselves what is the generative principle of kindness to which cultural historians must appeal if their enterprise is to have the relevance, the probity, and the explanatory power of evolutionary biology. Historical scholarship outside the life sciences is massively dedicated to uncovering those factors that have determined the shaping of cultural kinds such as nation-states, religious ceremonies, natural languages, and other artifactual kinds such as the junk bond and the bicycle. But on what basis?

The explanatory engine of perpetuation and change for the cultural kinds is certainly not the slightly imperfect chemically coded replication of molecular skeins of DNA. It is, I suggest, the slightly imperfect *imitation*, by cultural participants, of observably efficacious performances by other participants within a culture. I have in mind such performances as this: we notice that within a certain society experienced participants are able regularly and quite reliably to generate *a summons* to which a waiter will respond by the behavior-in-context of clapping hands. Such a summons is *an item of a cultural kind*. If we imitate this behavior, in the right immediate context and within an appropriate cultural milieu we are ourselves likely to generate another item of the same kind. With determination

5. Theoretical physicists no doubt conceive of the generative principle of kindness governing the non-biological natural kinds—the elementary components and forces of the universe and their combinations—as the topic currently receiving attention under the rubric “final theory” or “theory of everything.”

we may even succeed in re-locating the kind, and the means of generating its items, into a different cultural context; although, just as animals do not fare equally well in all environments there will be contexts in which failure is more likely than success and we shall find ourselves dispraised for our boorishness rather than rewarded for initiative. Clapping our hands in a roadside diner in America does not reliably generate a summons to which a waiter will respond, and we cannot expect to be purposefully imitated.

A *cultural participant* is a performer—normally an item of a biological kind⁶—who is capable of acquiring dispositions to generate and to use items of predictable cultural kinds by imitating the evidently successful behaviors-in-context of other individuals. Children learn, by watching and by imitating, how and when a cultural item of a kind such as an assent or a denial can be reliably generated by the behavior-in-context of saying words equivalent to “yes” or “no,” or by nodding or shaking the head. Moreover—as it is in the domain of biological reproduction—an imitation of a behavior-in-context that standardly yields an item of an expected cultural kind will occasionally be in some way variant. From time to time even a small variation on what is done will produce, with gratifying regularity, an item of a new and unexpected kind. Such novel items and their kinds are occasionally highly adaptive (as a classical Darwinian might put it⁷); but random variations in behavior will very often prove to be instrumentally void, failing in practice to generate items of an advantageously variant kind, or failing to be regularly reproducible or—for numerous reasons—to inspire imitation.

Imitable activities are usually characterized by scientifically cultivated speakers as *behaviors*; but it will be important to distinguish very clearly between mere behaviors, in the laboratory style, broadly context-independent, sense of this term, and those more elaborately structured *behaviors-in-context* that are essential if items of cultural kinds are to be generated. A way to help ourselves always to think contextually about the relevant behaviors would be to give them a general name that will keep them clearly distinguished from behaviors conceived in a narrow way, as mere bodily movements or as movements that are only parsimoniously contextualized. Following the influential suggestion of Richard Dawkins, there is good reason to speak of them as *memes*.⁸ It is a term that rhymes happily with *genes*, and is most felicitously suggestive of a parallel apparatus of theory.

Memes

Some of the abstractions that are now free-floating might usefully be anchored to a plain case or two. In early childhood we learn most, and most quickly, by imi-

6. In our common experience cultural participants are invariably of a biological kind, although they manifestly are not all and only human. But implications might be drawn about the cultural evolution of communities of so-called “artificial,” or non-biological, kindred intelligences.

7. No commitment to a brutal sociobiology is here asserted or implied. Part of the context of receptivity for an imitated but variant behavior and its consequently modified cultural item might be the climate of moral abhorrence into which it is projected and the reluctance of participants to engage in imitation. Moral constraints can thus be seen as determining, rather than as being determined by, the flow of material events.

8. Dawkins and other meme-theorists do not always distinguish clearly, or at all, between memes and those items of cultural kinds that are memetically generated. Authors of the most recent contributions to the topic still respond to the challenge to exemplify a meme by naming cultural kinds, such as *the traffic light* and *the popular song*.

tating the behaviors-in-context—the memes—of our parents and teachers. For example, we learn how and in what context it is possible to raise a hand so that an item of the cultural kind that is recognized as *a greeting* is fairly predictably generated.⁹ We are genetically endowed with an imitative disposition and an appreciation of contexts of indefinite wide extension. We are also as it happens extremely resourceful at putting a relatively small range of bodily movements, constrained as they are by accidents of anatomy, to an indefinitely extensive range of different uses in different contexts. For example, we acquire a meme that differs altogether from the greeting-by-hand-raising meme when we learn how to raise a hand—albeit in a superficially similar way—in a context that is regularly generative of *a vote*. The suggestion that a vote-generating meme by hand-raising employs the same bodily movement as the greeting-generating meme by hand-raising should be resisted to the extent that we are contemplating extended exertions of very different memes. The voter’s continuously self-monitored context of action is significantly different from the greeter’s, and the totality of events going forward “behaviorally” within the voter’s body—much of it invisibly—as a covert component of the hand-raising will also be significantly different.

We have at our disposal a great many hand-raising memes of a superficial bodily similarity. As pupils in the early classroom we imitatively learned how to raise a hand in such a way as to generate an item of the cultural kind recognized as *a request to leave the room*. Later we acquired the teachers’ meme of raising a hand to generate a *call for silence*. The contexts of memetic action, and hence the memes themselves, are indefinitely plastic. Moreover, memes will draw their efficacy not only from what is immediately perceptible but also from a context of recollection of what has previously occurred, of what is plausibly predictable and, in general, upon immense and expanding resources of memory and of supplementary internal physical and linguistic modeling.

The potency of genetic DNA and its potential coding for proteins is attributable to the fact that it may be millions or billions of chemical bases in length; and there is no reason to suppose that memes are less protean. Indeed, one might make the case that memes are in principle both more numerous and more intricate than genes, for they may be both elaborately compounded and significantly sequential. This is most conspicuously so in extended utterances of speech and writing, where the innovative possibilities (yet to be discussed) are most clearly manifest and the generative potential is endless. Whoever has at their disposal an adequate array of memes will be capable of generating and exploiting new items and variant kinds far beyond the capacity of any of the presently known non-human animals. The generation of items of such complex kinds as the *Shakespearean sonnet* or the *magical-realist painting* easily become part of a student’s repertoire. There is no assignable limit either to the number or to the complexity of the cultural kinds that can be memetically generated; and each kind

9. Cultural participants may find that the meme for generating a greeting by hand-raising is not communicable to Martians; as it is certainly useless—for more than one reason—in the company of fish. Meme-users must share appropriate anatomical and physiological similarities, as well as a habitual physical and social context, if they are to engage in continuously self-monitored behaviors-in-context in productively similar kind-perpetuating ways.

will have its history. It will emerge and be shaped by the single generative principle of memetic imitation and environmental adaptation. It is the task of the cultural historian to account for the appearance of significant memetic variations within each cultural kind and the role played by these variations taken together with environmental factors in the branching of established kinds. The occasional emergence of new kinds must be explained, as well as the extinction of old ones.¹⁰ If all this is to be done with a precision around which consensus can be built, some taxonomic apparatus that is appropriately analogous to the biological system of variety, species, genus, family, and order will need to be established.

It has already been remarked that, in contrast with kinds, items do not have histories. Properly speaking, no matter how interesting the vicissitudes of a particular item of a kind may be, no account of these accidents will qualify as the history of an item. The artwork called *Blue Poles* has already been implicated in innumerable engagements and relationships extending over half a century, but the painting does not have a history in the sense in which the cultural kind of which it is an item—called *American-type abstract-expressionist painting*—has a history. The author of *Blue Poles* himself, Jackson Pollock, was an item of a biological kind sustaining as many biographies as his chroniclers, past and future, have the ingenuity to construct, but he has no history in the sense in which the human biological kind has a history, or in the sense in which the romantic artist-hero cultural kind has a history. One inexplicit marker of this difference is buried almost invisibly in linguistic practice. Although kinds are much more like particulars than they are like non-particulars, they invariably bear general names such as *painting* and *human*. They do not bear proper names such as *Blue Poles* or *Jackson Pollock*.

“Art” is not the name of one kind

I have claimed that many conventionally so-called art historians are attracted by three fallacies, among which the supposition that “art” is the name of a single cultural kind is dominant. The second is that so-called “works of art” are the items of this putative kind; and the third is that this is a kind the history of which is shaped by a significantly different generative principle from that which shapes the histories of cultural kinds in general, such as the automobile and the wedding ceremony. But to concede as we surely must that (for example) the still-life painting is a cultural kind with a history and the kinetic sculpture is a cultural kind with a history, is not to concede that “art” is *one* kind; nor is it to concede that the kind thus putatively named has a *distinctive* history.

There are two points here. One of them concerns inappropriate concatenations of disparate cultural kinds, and the other concerns the distinctiveness of histories. On the first point: we suppose that the biological kind called the alligator has a history, and that the biological kind called the cabbage has a history. But we see

10. I take it that a new Shakespearean sonnet or magical-realist painting will not ordinarily qualify as a new kind of sonnet or as a new kind of painting—although it might do so. As in biology (although in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense of the words used) the question will turn on whether an “offspring” that is a candidate for recognition as a new kind could or could not continue to “breed” directly by imitation of its unmodified “parental” sources.

at once that—despite the significant affinity between all biological kinds—arbitrary conjunctions of biological kinds such as *the alligator and the cabbage* does not constitute a third biological kind, and it does not have a history. The still-life painting and the kinetic sculpture are similarly related one to the other in respect of their common debt to the generative principle of *cultural* kindedness, and they have distinct histories. An arbitrary conjunction of the two, however, does not specify another kind with another history.

The second point concerning the alleged distinctiveness of the history of a putative “art” kind brings to the surface a fundamental question. In the final analysis, is the one cultural kind to which so-called “artworks” allegedly belong to be regarded as owing its shape to *the same* memetic generative principle of kindedness as that which shapes cultural kinds in general—shoes and ships, sealing wax, cabbages and kings—or does it owe its shape to an entirely different generative principle of kindedness? There is after all a precedent in the biological field for what might be conceived as a parallel claim to exclusiveness. It has been argued that humans are not properly comprehended as items of a biological kind like other animals, but are of a kind that was uniquely created in a divine image. Human history (so it has been said) is not shaped in the evolutionary way but is uniquely driven by spiritual powers toward some ineffable goal. The history of the human kind is attributable to a unique generative principle of kindedness. So it is with the *art* kind. Only the most intrepid of historians are nowadays disposed to venture in this direction, and I shall not pursue them.

It is precisely their readiness to admit that conventionally so-called works of art are items taken as it were semantic prisoner from the conviviality of their own—often very different—cultural kinds by more or less arbitrary stipulation¹¹ that distinguishes the modest art historian—who is essentially a cultural historian with a taste for pictures¹²—from the heroic art historian. This hero marches to the antique drum of those otherwise admirable European scholars, the founders of an autonomous academic “discipline,” who persuaded their institutions, along with generations of their students, that “art” is the name of a distinctive kind with a history uniquely driven by its own generative principle of kindedness.

The most influential among the Titans were, of course, those who directed the attentive eye to the so-called “period styles” as the visible manifestation of art’s allegedly distinctive generative principle of kindedness. This is a dogma that has been variously elaborated: for example, students have been instructed that “art” is the name of a kind the history of which is peculiarly shaped by an *oscillating* generative principle of kindedness, so that successive period styles are constrained to alternate between “painterly” and “linear” modes. Additionally—or alternatively—one finds more empirically grounded reveries, such as for exam-

11. I take it that a found natural or biological object such as a flower or driftwood becomes an item of a cultural kind when the memes are established for generating items of a cultural kind such as an *interior decoration* or an *art gallery exhibit* by selecting and placing such arbitrarily “imported” items.

12. The phrase “a taste for pictures” is elliptical. One might amplify it as “a taste for things of the *sorts* that are commonly displayed in art museums.” It is unnecessary—assuming it to be possible—to spell out all of the ways in which the phrase “work of art” is in practice so applied to items of various sorts that a historian’s attention might be seduced and variably constrained by the usages.

ple that the fluctuations in period styles that are allegedly the visible manifestation of art's history are shaped by the force of emergent national virtues.¹³

It should not be necessary to catalogue these aberrations of thought exhaustively or to construct refutations of them severally. In responding to all of them it should be sufficient to say that they are generically flawed. There is no kind to which the name "art" can intelligibly be applied that is *sui generis*, uniquely driven by its own generative principle of kindedness. Whatever purposes the recognition of period styles may serve from time to time—and I do not suggest for one moment that such a recognition must always be without point—this purpose cannot be to distinguish "art history" from cultural history in general on *generative* grounds. All cultural kinds are probably more or less disposed to exhibit period styles, to a sufficiently discerning eye.

II. A REVISED USE OF THE TERM "ART"

Memes and the universal regularities

We recognize, evaluate, and imitatively perpetuate, sometimes with enthusiasm and sometimes without, new cultural kinds that are generated by variant memes. Indeed, if this were not the case there would be no cultural history: cultural kinds would not have emerged, or they would persist unchanged in perpetuity. New and variant memes, generative of new and variant cultural kinds, may not be recognized—much less appraised and imitated—at first sight, but once identified they are available for imitation. So seamlessly are our behaviors-in-context linked to their consequences that it seems to an observer, when a participant's new meme is, *de facto*, generative of an item of a new and unanticipated kind, that this meme must have been deliberately employed. But this cannot possibly be so. To attribute deliberation is to suppose that the user has generated an item of a kind that was both predictable and, in some plausible sense, anticipated. The idea of an end that was unpredictable in principle and therefore unanticipated in practice might nevertheless have been deliberately achieved is simply incoherent.

For example: we are now comfortably in possession of the memes by which we can produce, with fair reliability, an item of the cultural kind that we call a crop, by scattering appropriate seeds at an appropriate time and in a suitable place. It is incredible that the first time such a felicitous seed-scattering crop-generating behavior occurred it was exercised *as* a crop-generating meme. It must have taken many generations for this powerfully exploitable behavior-in-context to become purposefully and imitably connected with crop generation in the minds of cultural participants. Some of the earliest seed scatterings may well have been performed not accidentally or at random but memetically, as behaviors-in-context known to be regularly generative of an amusement, or of a (notionally) fertility god-propitiating ceremony; but these are different memes. The expectation that a reliable agricultural outcome would emerge cannot have driven the first crop sowings. We do not need evidence of this because we have

13. Heinrich Wölfflin wrote: "Yet we cannot get over the fact that every people has epochs in the history of its art which seem, more than others, the peculiar revelation of its national virtues." *Principles of Art History* [1915] (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 236.

the assurance of reason, reinforced by a battery of questions that archeologists can, and do, now begin to answer. When, where, how, and why did the recognition of some particular crop as an item of a cultural kind that can be memetically generated with good reliability actually emerge?

New memes and their potential may be recognized with a pleasing suddenness. The more dramatic of them have tended, in modern Western society, to be attributed to the workings of an individual genius who is credited—especially when the meme is beneficial—with the first, necessarily inadvertent, “use” to attract public recognition. This genius tends also to be conceived, inconsistently, as a performer of essentially unrepeatable acts; a person gifted with skills of such elevation that they are for all practical purposes *inimitable* by ordinary mortals. But this must be a serious mistake, for with all memes—whether they are old or new—imitability is of the essence. The idea of the meme as predictably and reliably efficacious, and *therefore* as imitable in principle, encloses the thought that if the complex and massively unknown regularities of the universe can be exploited by any person they can in principle be similarly exploited by every person. The potency of memes for cultural participants is attributable precisely to the consistency and reliability with which they draw upon universal regularities to generate items of predictable kinds. Fortunately it is not necessary—indeed, it is manifestly impossible—to know all of the regularities that are invoked when any meme is used. With such omniscience we should be infallible, and have nothing to learn.

The radically unintended origins of every new meme must be fully appreciated. The point is not that a cultural participant is unable to anticipate new memes in a loose sense, as for example one might anticipate a way to convert lead into gold, or a way to arrest a cancer. Even when searches thus expressed are ultimately rewarded for the first time, their anticipation will have been incomplete. Few meme-seekers will be without some optimistic strategy, perhaps no better than an inarticulate hunch, about promising ways to move and attractive areas of exploration. But the logic is simple: a seeker who is already in possession of the very meme that is sought does not need to seek it. In spite of this it is still part of a waning conventional wisdom among cultivated Westerners that the emergence of new memes is in no way attributable to anyone’s good fortune but that it follows most abundantly in the trail-blazing wake of the “creative artist,” whose forte is the theft of fire from heaven. This appreciation of the abnormal inventiveness of painters, sculptors, playwrights, and perhaps even, although more mysteriously, musicians was perhaps never entirely misdirected. It was however always inappropriate to the extent that new memes have been mistakenly conceived as *inimitably* original. But there are no inimitable memes. New memes depend for their viability upon the universal regularities; and once identified *as* memes they become a public cultural resource.

The public accessibility of those regularities upon which memes depend is an issue transcending in its significance the often alleged singularity of conventionally so-called works of art. Moreover, in relation to an interplay play between the familiar and the new among those memes that were implicated in the course of

their generation, works of art do not differ in principle from cultural artifacts of every kind. So we may well ask: If art history is not the name of a subject differing in its deep theoretical substrate but only in superficial topic from cultural history, why is it that several generations of scholars have so vehemently asserted the contrary, and have built an academic fortress around their conviction? How shall the defenses be breached?

The most popular accounts of the unique kindedness of art do not rest nowadays upon one of the older essentialisms, such as that art is identifiable, in essence, with imitation, revelation, expression, therapy, or beauty. They rely rather upon an unspecific association of art with creativity. We are told that works of art are items of a kind the history of which is shaped by a generative principle of kindedness the peculiarity of which is that it delivers up created items for our contemplation. This notionally contrasts with the generality of cultural items, that are only made.¹⁴ No satisfactory account is given of how items of the allegedly created “kind” are to be distinguished from items of those other generically impoverished kinds that have only been made.

One of the considerations upon which this doctrine relies is the widely held belief that, whatever creativity finally amounts to, it must somehow be related to originality, and originality is more appropriately—if not uniquely—required of artists than of workers in other domains. Children are routinely instructed, from the finger-painting class to the Ph.D. in Creative Arts, that works of art incarnate something other than, and incomparably more valuable than, those skills of cultural production that can be imitatively acquired by any diligent person. But judgments of originality in “art” relate to the recognition of new memes in precisely the same way as judgments of originality in any of the adjacent cultural domains: in technology, science, politics, business, law, and sport. There are commentators who will as passionately, and with no less good reason, applaud the originality of toilers in fields such as those cultivated by Mr. Edison, Mme. Joliot-Curie, and Ms. Keller. Creativity, nominated as the criterion differentiating items of a putative “art” kind from items of all other kinds, offers a key that spins in its socket, turning nothing.

The metaphysical drive

How, then, shall the term “art” be given a use, and how shall “art historians” be given a viable function, bearing in mind that there is no art kind, differing from all other kinds in respect of its generative principle of kindedness?¹⁵ I suggest that if it is appropriately conceived and secured by viable definitions, innovation

14. The Renault company currently exploits in its television advertising the claim “We *create* cars.” Buyers are evidently invited to associate these consumer products with works of art, rather than with the generality of artifacts.

15. E. H. Gombrich momentarily seemed to grasp the point when he famously wrote, as the first sentence of his influential book *The Story of Art* (first published 1950): “There really is no such thing as art.” That he did not fully grasp the point is made clear by his consistent (but inexplicit) reliance upon a use of the term “art” as if it did, after all, name a kind with a distinctive history. The “kind” he had in mind might be characterized very roughly as: *mainly (but not exclusively) pictorial representations to which symbolic significance is attributed*. But this is no more a kind than groceries is a kind. If, as he insightfully remarks, there really is no such thing as art, then there really is no such thing as art history.

may after all provide the key. It is possible to find an association between memetic innovation and art properly so-called. We might even—if we are determined to rehabilitate the word—discover, or rediscover, a way of speaking credibly about art as *creativity*.

At some risk of condoning unnatural or supernatural teleological powers in an intellectual climate of causal explanations, we speak easily of the behaviors of biological organisms as if they were purposefully driven. Most conspicuously, perhaps, we call to mind the drives to feed and to reproduce; but the figure can be extended. We owe our own sophistication, such as it is, to the evolution of a capability to observe the behaviors of others, to recognize the regular consequences of these behaviors and to imitate the efficacious memes on which cultural participation rests.¹⁶ A cultural participant of any species is an individual with an ongoing capability to extend its ability to exploit the individual-transcending regularities by imitating the manifestly successful behaviors of others. Moreover, we humans alone (so far as we know) have developed as one of our productive behaviors an ability to speak *about* the world. Such conversation—specifically in relation to the question of what there is in the world, has been characterized as the *metaphysical* enterprise. It is not entirely fanciful to characterize organisms with an ability to recognize the regularly efficacious memes of others and to imitate them—quick learners—as metaphysically driven.

Whether it is manually or intellectually expressed, our competences are extended by the onward transmission of familiar memes and, more significantly, by the acquisition of new ones. The anatomical and functional similarities that are shared between de facto cultural participants belonging to different species makes memetic transmission possible, and the restrictions imposed in this way upon an understanding of the world can be transcended. It was a giant step to become capable of modeling the powers of participants active within the notional—perhaps still unrealized—cultures of imaginary creatures who do not altogether share our own perceptual and motor capacities. We cannot, like bees, negotiate our way naturally in relation to the distinctions available in ultraviolet light; but we have learned the memes we need to do so prosthetically.

The growth of our competence as meme users, practically hedged but boundless in principle, relies upon continuous memetic innovation without which all cultural kinds would freeze into immobility. No doubt most of the small epiphanies that we gratefully encounter as new memes, and imitatively appropriate, are only subjectively new. Most of them will already be familiar elsewhere to other cultural participants or to participants in other cultures, but some of them must be absolutely new, not only locally but—whether we know it or not—universally. A Platonic mindset might find it a congenial fancy to suppose that absolutely new memes stand ready with those universal regularities on which their efficacy depends, “outside” history, awaiting discovery. Every meme subsisting in the notional universe of all possibilities is available in principle to the community of users that chances to stumble upon its viability.

16. Recent research suggests that orangutans were well advanced on this road as much as fourteen million years ago. See, for example, Carel van Schaik and others. “Orangutan Cultures and the Evolution of Material Culture,” *Science* 299 (January 3, 2003), 102-105.

The quasi-fiction of the undiscovered meme, trading upon the metaphor of the undiscovered land, must be almost as old as reflective thought and speculative conversation. More specifically: the idea of a nexus between the proper use of some word equivalent to “art” and the recognition of ways of regularly generating cultural items of new and variant kinds with an emphasis not upon arbitrary invention but upon reality-constrained discovery, is surely ancient. There is no linguistic tradition standing implacably against the recognition of a use for the word “art” as equivalent to *memetic innovation*, understood in contrast with the merely skillful perpetuation of established memes. On the understanding that “creativity” implies memetic innovation, the recognition of creativity as a necessary condition for art properly so-called, but *not* as a necessary condition for art as it is conventionally so-called, would be benign.

Entertainments as the prime sites of memetic innovation

It is a seductive thought that memetic innovation is most likely to be detected when the normal consequences of using already familiar memes are reviewed by spectators who are free to “misread” or to “mistake” what has been deliberately made or done. Such “misreadings” are most likely to be repudiated by the makers and doers themselves, but they may nevertheless be viable readings of what could have been deliberately made or done, and might therefore be done again. An efficacious and readily imitable meme, the availability of which was unsuspected by a cultural participant who is the purposeful user of some *other* meme, can be fortuitously disclosed to a misreader. It will be of no concern whether the aspect of the new meme that was inadvertently harnessed by the performer was some detail of bodily movement in the narrow sense, or some previously neglected element in the extended context of the action.

The prominent public deployment of familiar memes by cultural participants, and the consequential generation of items of familiar cultural kinds around which bystanders are assembled and from which they are separated by a convention of detachment or disengagement, has a general name. It is called *entertainment*. Classic entertainments make provision for a non-participatory audience, formally distanced from the action in a stadium, a theater, a concert hall, a gallery, a cinema, or a circus tent. Even the personal armchair services the distancing of a dispersed audience of bysitters to literary or televisual performances. Entertainments can thus be seen as prime sites for the facilitation of both relative and absolute memetic discoveries to be made by onlookers, precisely because their occasionally productive takes and their felicitous mis-takes about what has been done and about how it might be done again is, to a significant degree, detached from binding collusion with the narrow purposefulness of the entertainer.¹⁷

The significance of an audience’s detachment from the performances of entertainers has been obscured in practice by a countervailing tendency for the professional forms of entertainment to be dominated by displays of essentially familiar, although exceptionally polished, skills. An audience’s metaphysical

17. Lone performers can of course stand by and observe their own performances at any interval of detachment, down to the split second. They may even—like automatic Surrealists—scarcely be able to say what it was they take themselves to have been purposefully doing.

drive is in some danger of frustration just because it has become the conventional wisdom that the appropriate response to any skilled performance is the response of an expert appreciator whose own abilities notionally match those of the performer. On this view the ideal respondent to an entertainment is already thoroughly familiar with the established memes of a well-rehearsed domain of action. He or she is expected to recognize and to reward with praise—as if they were uncommonly adroit but not otherwise problematic—the skills of the performer. Contrastingly, a radically inexpert openness to what might have been done or to what could have been done is the bystander’s invaluable contribution to the identification of new memes. This openness of mind must struggle always against those intentionalistic modes of appreciation that currently dominate, in the art gallery no less than on the tennis court. The increasing popularity of competitive prize-giving in the conventionally so-called “arts,” as if they were gladiatorial contests favoring more accomplished winners against less accomplished losers, is a clear indication of this.

There may be room for a distinction to be drawn between those entertainments which, by their nature, deal mainly in displays of high competence, as contrasted with those that constrain the audience’s appreciative mindset less tightly. The gymnast more obviously solicits attention to her skill than does the comedian, who may prefer to conceal it. But such a distinction as this would not clearly mark a difference between the way in which “the arts,” as they are currently and conventionally so-called, are separated from their adjacent forms of entertainment in the weekend press, such as sports, holidays, and lifestyle. The demand that entertainers of all sorts should impress an expert audience seems to be irresistible everywhere. But if the deeply significant purpose of entertainments is not, after all, that they shall gratify our expectations but that they shall feed the metaphysical drive by valorizing memetic innovation, then the productive mismatch between what has been purposefully done and what can plausibly be seen to have been done will be crucial. “Michelangelo here shows us how to . . .” is a comment anticipating a likely extension of an audience’s subjective memetic repertoire; but “In this accidentally emergent contrast of scale Michelangelo discovered a way to . . .” recognizes an innovation that may well have been absolute. It is as the surprised retrospective interpreter of what she has herself done and not as the accomplished doer of something else, that the entertainer functions most characteristically as a locus of memetic innovation, or as I now suggest—using the word resolutely against the current of convention—as an *artist*.

What “art” is

I take the case against a misuse of the word “art” as if it were the name of a kind with a history driven by a unique generative principle of kindedness to be conclusive. But in deference to a persistent linguistic tradition and to those considerations that have already been adduced, I take it to be a word that cannot be summarily discarded. How, then, might we use it?

The most appropriate use of the word “art” is not as the name of a kind but as the name of the *category* of memetic innovation. “Category” is a notoriously contested philosophical term, but I draw from it the main implication that, what-

ever else they may be, categories are sorts that do not have histories in the way in which kinds have histories. Memetic innovation is today what it has always been, and what it always will be. It is neither itself driven by a generative principle, nor is it temporally shaped. Art, considered as memetic innovation, is the ahistorical deliverer of historical shape in every domain of purposeful action in which items of relatively persistent cultural kinds are generated. The ordinary practice of praising those surgeons, footballers, crooks, and vendors of real estate whose names are associated with striking memetic innovation by speaking of them as artists was always insightful. Conceptual disorder is the price paid for conflating a muddled concept of art conventionally so-called—as if it were a kind with a distinctive history—with a lucid concept of art properly so-called, as an ahistorical category of memetic innovation.

Some further confusion stems from a related misunderstanding of a linguistic nexus between the conventional misuse of the word “art” (as the name of a kind) and an appropriate use of the phrase “work of art.” Those speakers who are reluctant to adjust their minds will rhetorically—and perhaps insatiably—demand an answer to the question: “What, then, is a work of art, if it is not an item of the art kind?” We must respond in the following way. Works of art cannot be items of an art kind for the overwhelmingly good reason that there is no such kind, and there are therefore no such items. But “work of art” can, with perfect propriety, be applied to the items (or *members*, as philosophers may prefer to say) of a certain *class*. The class in question might be broadly specified in the following way: *Works of art are those things to which attention is paid, and for the duration of that attention, in the hope that they may yield up to a radically detached audience the discovery of some memetic innovation.*¹⁸

This is a prescription that does not disqualify works of art as they are currently—conventionally and mistakenly—so-called from occasional enrollment in the class of works of art properly so-called. As conventionally so-called works of art are currently presented to their viewers in art galleries and museums, it is already expected that they will attract a special form of attention that is usually mischaracterized—either circularly or emptily—as “aesthetic.” The proposed definition in no way discourages cultural historians from their purpose; which is to uncover the origins, the vicissitudes, and the ultimate extinction of the cultural kinds to which individual works belong, as items of early Hellenistic sculpture, of late modernist painting, and so on. There will be a bonus. Such historians will no longer be expected to drag along with them the decomposing carcass of dogma that there is a kind called “art” with a history of its own, that must simultaneously be uncovered.

Some conclusions

This paper proposes three radical innovations in our thinking about history in general and about art in particular. First, I offer an evolutionary way of distinguishing history from mere storytelling—including true storytelling—in the face

18. A smaller and more contestable class might be specified by insisting upon *actual* innovative success within some cultural context, rather than by staking an optimistic claim upon the possibility of success. But in that case we shall have to discard most of the contents of the art museums.

of a postmodern consensus that all history is storytelling. Second, I distinguish memes clearly from the items that they generate and from the cultural kinds of which they are the items. Although meme theorists do tend to speak of memes as imitable behaviors,¹⁹ the literature of memetics consistently identifies memes not with behaviors but with cultural kinds, nominating such kinds as warning cries and popular song as if they—the kinds—were the exemplary memes that are transmissible by imitation. Because cultural kinds range from warning cries to TV dinners it is understandable that there is an ongoing lament in the literature about the deeply mysterious ontology of the meme. Third, I offer a definitive way of ending the futile dispute between “art history” and cultural history.

Finally, by valorizing unprecedented readings of the world as radically open to the emergence of new kinds by the exertion of new memes I may seem to be in tune with one of the dominant themes of postmodern thought. However, I condone no irresponsible exercise of license. On the contrary: a new meme does not depend for its viability upon the sheer, reckless verbosity of the persuasively garrulous cultural imagineer. Its viability finally depends upon the objective regularities of the real world.

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19. See, for example, Susan Blackmore, “Imitation and the Definition of a Meme,” *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 2 (1998).
http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/1998/vol2/blackmore_s.html (accessed October 27, 2003).