

2012

## Defining Art: What it is and Why we Need it

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### Recommended Citation

Colonna, Sean G., "Defining Art: What it is and Why we Need it" (2012). *Senior Projects Spring 2012*. Paper 266.  
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Defining Art:  
What it is and Why we Need it

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, NY  
May, 2012

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## Introduction: A Definition of Art--Our Desperate Need

Given that this is a paper about the nature of art, it is perhaps appropriate that we initially broach the subject by means of a metaphor. Imagine an individual who claims to be a surgeon, but who possesses what are called by the medical institutions of the day “avant-garde” techniques. He often performs open-heart surgery blindfolded, or with “non-traditional” materials such as spoons or pens. He claims that one should not be limited by the artificial confines of past conceptions of surgery, and that he is breaking new ground with his techniques. Furthermore, he goes so far as to argue that there is no fundamental difference between surgery and other practices, that it is all simply a matter of cultural conditioning and perspective. “Definitions,” he declares, “are arbitrary social constructs.”

Clearly, such an individual is a raving lunatic at best, or a sociopath at worst. Either way, none of us would trust our bodies to him, knowing that his so-called “innovations” are actually dangerous, lethal practices. We would properly hold such a “surgeon” in contempt not just for his incompetence, but for his attempt to justify it and transform it into a badge of honor. We would understand that surgery depends on a precise understanding of the facts of human biology, and that a lack of such knowledge would lead to injury or death.

These biological facts determine not only what the goal of surgery is--the normal state of human healthiness and homeostasis--but also the means by which this goal is to be attained. For example, the basic fact that the human organism requires a constant flow of oxygen and blood in order to survive means that during quadruple bypass surgery, during which the heart is not pumping, the surgeon must use a cardiopulmonary pump in order to ensure the survival of the

patient. At the hands of an alleged 'surgeon' who did not possess such basic knowledge, the life of the patient would surely be in jeopardy. It is quite clear that a rigorously defined set of facts about human nature are absolutely critical for the success of the surgeon's practice, and that without an understanding of such facts, the very field of surgery--and indeed that of medicine in general--would not exist. Without knowing what human nature is, what a healthy human body looks like and does, doctors and surgeons cannot perform their function. The field of medicine cannot be comprehended or put into practice without a prior understanding of human nature, specifically with respect to man's biological composition and functions.

Given the ease with which this is understood in the physical sciences such as medicine, it is quite baffling that many of those who study the spiritual sciences--the humanities--are so unwilling to engage in a serious inquiry into the relation between their field of expertise, and the nature of the human being to which it refers. This problem is particularly acute in the field of aesthetics and art theory. For many aestheticians, to declare that there is no such thing as a single, universal 'human nature' is not to confess one's incompetence, as would be the case for a medical professional, but to expound an allegedly enlightened, culturally informed position; we encounter time and again the notion that any attempt to rigorously define man's nature--or worse, how that nature sets definite limitations on the subject of inquiry--merely proves one's ethnocentrism or naiveté.

While any self-respecting doctor would cringe at those who would assert that medicine can be practiced in any way one sees fit, implying that the human organism is just a malleable piece of flux with no specifiable nature or identity, many of our leading aestheticians make precisely the same sorts of claims with respect to art. The result is a concept of art that is

thoroughly ungrounded, one that connotes whatever one wishes but denotes nothing in particular. Rather than offering clarification, contemporary art theories often lead only to confusion as we attempt to comprehend how something as commonplace as a piece of driftwood or a urinal could be classified as the same kind of thing as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or the paintings of Vermeer.<sup>1</sup> While the anthropocentric grounding of the physical science of medicine has been long established and the resulting torrent of innovations and improvements have begun to be taken for granted, we are left with a field of aesthetic inquiry that often leaves the layman in stammering helplessness when challenged to argue why the latest pile of garbage or smattering of random noises is not art. While we are reaching ever higher peaks of medical progress--lengthening the human lifespan, curing diseases, improving surgical techniques--our aesthetic theories have brought us to the stage where canned fecal matter is being displayed as art in such alleged bastions of culture as The Tate Museum.<sup>2</sup>

This radical disparity should give us pause. There is clearly an epistemological double-standard at work. The intellectual sloppiness which would lead to a deluge of malpractice suits in one profession is the institutionalized norm in the other. Why?

Many contend that art is too profoundly personal, too subjectively powerful to be encapsulated into a rational definition. The presupposition is that reason somehow destroys the value of that which it can explain, and this is the exact opposite of the truth. The field of medicine is subject to the strictest, most ruthlessly exacting standards of definition and verification not in spite of, but precisely *because* of the critical importance of this field of study

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<sup>1</sup> For an impressive survey of the disconnection between avant-garde art theories and the opinions of the 'man on the street,' see Louis Torres and Michelle Marder Kamhi, *What Art Is: The Esthetic Theory of Ayn Rand* (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> The piece is entitled "Artist's Shit" created by Piero Manzoni.

to our survival and well-being. Truth, logic, and reason are held as the gold standard of judgment because these are the only means of ensuring that medicine actually achieves its goal--human survival and health.

Contemporary trends to the contrary notwithstanding, it is just the same with the nature of art. Feelings of profound spiritual involvement should not be taken as proof that the field of aesthetics should be barred from rational inquiry and definition, but rather as evidence that such an inquiry is all the more necessary and urgent. Without intellectual honesty and epistemological rigor, the science of aesthetics is as useless to man as the fields of astrology and alchemy.

The above is, admittedly, a rather pessimistic view of the field of contemporary aesthetics, and perhaps unfairly so. There have been, and still are, many great minds who argue for a rational grounding for aesthetics, and this paper will draw from a small handful of them: Ayn Rand, Susanne Langer, Ellen Dissanayake, and Denis Dutton. Using the theories of these authors as a framework, we will attempt to answer the question 'what is art?' Drawing upon a scientific methodology, we will recognize that, just as the question 'what is medicine?' cannot be answered until the relevant facts of human nature have been properly understood, so, too, with our current aesthetic inquiry. For both fields of human activity, medicine and art, there are specifically definable aspects of our nature which both necessitate them and make them possible. In medicine, the facts are that human beings are capable of autonomously regulating their biological processes and maintaining their own health, up to a certain point; environmental factors--such as extreme weather, malnutrition, severe wounds--may override these innate biological abilities, thus simultaneously providing the conditions for the possibility of the practice of medicine and necessitating its existence.

This paper will make an analogous argument concerning the source of art's existence. It will argue that there are specifically definable aspects of human nature that both allow for and necessitate the existence of art. Unlike the field of medicine, however, whose existence depends upon physical or biological needs of the human organism, the field of artistic creation depends upon the *cognitive* needs of the human organism. The source of art lies in the particular properties and needs of man's unique form of consciousness, rationality. Correlatively, the ability to fulfill these particular cognitive needs is the essence of art, its defining characteristic.

Any attempts to define something as abstract as art would benefit from exposing the epistemological premises on which it is based, and so the first chapter of this paper will address itself to the nature of concepts and definitions, drawing primarily from Rand's work on the subject and focusing on the practical use of the latter and the crucial role they play in human cognition. Such a discussion will not only ground the current definitional endeavor in a wider context, but will establish many key premises that will become critical in the subsequent portion of the argument during which the definition of art is formulated.

In chapters two and three, we will broaden our discussion to an analysis of certain aspects of the human mind, making use of the views provided by both Langer and Dissanayake. The former's views on the nature and phenomenology of symbolism augment many of Rand's claims concerning concept formation, and both of these authors' arguments accord with Dissanayake's ethological findings concerning the universal tendency for human beings to practice what she calls "making special." Having considered these facts in some detail, we will construct a theory of human nature that highlights those elements of our existence which both allow for and necessitate that which we call 'art.'



With an understanding of what makes art necessary and possible, we will then begin to construct a definition of art in chapter four, using the cognitive source alluded to above as the grounding for art's essence. We will discuss other aspects of human activity that are within the same genus as art, i.e. ritual and play, and it will be shown that, while similar, these two forms of activity are nevertheless distinct from that of artistic creation. Using Rand's unique theory of concept formation, the precise nature of this difference will be made clear in cognitive terms. Having discussed both genus and differentia, this portion of the paper will conclude with an explication of the definition of art, which is drawn from Rand's aesthetic theory.

The final chapter will steer away from largely deductive, theoretical arguments for the definition of art and turn toward inductive arguments in favor of the definition. It is at this point that Dutton's arguments concerning various Western and non-Western art forms will be most valuable. We will seek to pit our definition against common problems in art theory, as well as looking at how the definition actually plays out 'on the ground,' so to speak, i.e. taking various objects or practices whose status as art or non-art is not readily intuited and seeing whether our definition gives us a satisfactory ontological judgment. We will then close the paper with implications, as well as potential problems with the theory. Although we will attempt to answer as many objections as possible during the course of the argument, it is inevitable that some will be left unaddressed at the end, it must then be left for further research to determine whether or not these are lethal to the theory generally.

Before proceeding to the argument proper, a few words are, unfortunately, necessary to defend my choice of discussing Ayn Rand's views in the first place. It seems to be the case that many modern philosophers have deemed Rand to be "unserious" or "a hack," without having

engaged with her philosophical writings in a serious, academic way--or, in most cases, even bothering to read them at all. This unfortunate and eminently unjust treatment has rendered the very notion of "Rand scholarship" to be almost oxymoronic in most intellectual circles, with a consequent dearth of institutionally accepted critical analysis of her works and ideas. Admittedly, Rand consciously positioned herself as an intellectual outsider, and her disdain for contemporary academia is not difficult to uncover in her often polemical and abrasive writings. However, controversial claims and emotionally charged writing have never provoked such unanimous disdain from intellectuals as Rand's writings have done today. Many philosophers have written with passion and mercilessly biting criticism before Rand, and many will continue to do so. I do not think it fair to single her out for academic ostracization purely on these grounds. As to any other, more rational grounds for objecting to her ideas, I plan to meet them head on in my writings here. It is my hope that, by the end of this paper, Rand's unique and valuable contribution to contemporary philosophical inquiry will be clear to more than just myself and small handful of others.

## Chapter 1: Epistemological Foundations

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold: to establish what the nature of this project is, i.e. what it means to attempt to define a concept, and to explain what I take to be the foundational reason that we have concepts and definitions at all, namely to provide the mind with what Rand calls “unit-economy.”

To begin with, we will look to what Rand sees as the starting point of human psycho-epistemology, what she calls a “unit.”<sup>3</sup> A unit is “an existent regarded as a separate member of a group of two or more similar members,” and it is in terms of units that man apprehends all of reality.<sup>4</sup> Every object we encounter is not a brand new, unprecedented phenomenon, but rather something that bears some relationship to all of our past experiences; in other words, we grasp not only the identity of the object of perception, but the relationship that identity has to that of all other objects we have knowledge of.

Think for example, of driving in the passenger seat of a car. Looking out the window, one observes a tree passing by, then another slightly larger tree, followed by the local post office. Even if, as a young child, we do not know how to verbalize our discrimination by calling these objects ‘trees’ and ‘a post office,’ this does not alter the fact that we are able to perceive the first two as, in some sense, similar to one another, and the last object to be somehow different. We are able to see a kind of similarity between the trees that differentiates them from the post office, allowing us to immediately group the two trees together as one class of objects and distinguish the post office as a member of another class.

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘psycho-epistemology’ is a term of Rand’s invention that refers to “the study of man’s cognitive processes from the aspect of the interaction between the conscious mind and the automatic functions of the subconscious.” Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1975), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (New York: Meridian, 1967), 6

Of course, this observation is nothing new, as many philosophers from Plato onward have remarked upon this ability to instantly categorize objects into certain classes. But Rand's discussion of this timeless subject highlights an important fact whose implications have great significance for the nature of definitions: the ability to apprehend existents as units is a function of both consciousness and reality. The unit-perspective is predicated on a certain way of regarding reality, presupposing a specific kind of consciousness; but the relationships that are regarded in this special way are not invented--they are perceived, i.e. grounded in something other than simply the machinations of the mind. For this reason, "the concept 'unit' is a bridge between metaphysics and epistemology: units do not exist *qua* units, what exists are things, but *units are things viewed by a consciousness in certain existing relationships.*"<sup>5</sup> Thus, the differences between the trees and the post office in the above example are based on perceptually given, objectively verifiable properties of each of those objects, as against being the mere product of social convention or subjective whim.

Even these observations, however, are not entirely unique; they harken back to Kant's arguments concerning the necessary conjunction of consciousness and reality in order to give rise to the presentation of an object. Rand's truly unique contribution to the field of epistemology is given in her answer to the question: '*how* is it that we are able to classify objects as units?' In other words, what is the nature of the process by which we are able to apprehend reality in terms of units, and not of discrete, unrelated sensory events?

To begin to answer these questions, we must first acquaint ourselves with the nature of measurement as Rand understands it. "Measurement is the identification of a relationship--a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

quantitative relationship established by means of a standard that serves as a unit.”<sup>6</sup> For example, when attempting to measure *attributes*, which are perhaps the easiest kind of existent to measure, we must do so by means of a concrete instantiation of that attribute, which then serves as the standard of measurement. Thus, to measure an object’s weight, we must first have a specific unit of weight that serves as the standard of comparison, such as a pound or an ounce. According to Rand, the purpose of measurement is to expand the range of man’s consciousness; it takes that which is not directly graspable and brings it into a relationship with that which is so graspable. Man cannot easily perceive the distance of 10 miles with his naked eye, but by establishing the relationship of a mile to a foot, easily perceived without any sensory aids, he is able to calculate that distance and much more. The same, of course, applies in reverse, with the fractional relationships to feet and inches that very small organisms or building materials bear. Thus, measurement is an essentially “anthropocentric process” since it relates everything that can be measured to that which is easily perceivable by man.<sup>7</sup>

These insights into the nature of measurement are crucial because, on Rand’s view, conceptualization is an essentially mathematical process, and “mathematics is the science of measurement.”<sup>8</sup> The relation between measurement, mathematics and concept formation will become clear after we consider the two key processes involved in the process of forming a concept, namely isolation and integration. Though these are inseparable processes that work in

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> These observations are largely derived from those of in Leonard Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Rand, *Introduction*, 7.

tandem with one another, it is useful for the purposes of theoretical exposition to describe each of them individually.

### Isolation

Isolation describes the process by which we differentiate certain existents from one another, usually based on their perceptually-given characteristics, though for higher level abstractions we must use more abstract characteristics as the basis of isolation. We can distinguish trees from buildings largely on the basis of perceptually given information, but we cannot distinguish love from friendship merely by observing lovers and friends. The latter differentiation requires more conceptual awareness, linking long chains of abstractions together such as the concepts of ‘value,’ ‘commonality,’ and ‘respect.’ For either kind of isolation, however, one element remains constant: that of apprehending *similarities* between the units in question.

What is nature of this similarity and how does the mind discern it? Rand’s unique answer is that similarity is essentially a *mathematical relationship* between objects, one based on a quantitative relationship between the measurement of one of the object’s particular characteristics and a unit of measurement for that characteristic. It is much easier to understand Rand’s measurement principle when discussing the formation of lower-level concepts, i.e. those based on perceptually given, rather than conceptually abstracted, information. For this reason, I will unpack Rand’s understanding of the nature of similarity by walking through a hypothetical process of the first stages of forming the concept ‘red.’ It is beyond the bounds of this paper to discuss how this process would apply to all other abstract concepts such as ‘morality,’ and

‘justice,’ though we will eventually be taking up the formidable task of applying this theory to the formation of the concept ‘art.’

In gathering the data which will eventually give content to our concept ‘red,’ we begin, as children, observing such things as strawberries, apples, and blood. We note that there are clear, unmistakable differences between these objects: the former are delicious while the latter tastes repugnant; strawberries have different shapes and sizes than apples; blood is a liquid, while the fruits are solid. Despite these and the manifold other differences between these objects, there is, however, one single similarity that unites them: that which we will eventually come to call their red color.

We are able to perceive this fact, even though we have yet to form the concept ‘red,’ because our minds are able to note that each of these objects is quantitatively related to the same unit of measurement, i.e. the length of a lightwave, and that they differ only in the specific measurements of that quantitative relationship. The strawberry’s lighter hue differs from the darker color of blood, caused by the differing length of lightwaves these two kinds of objects reflect; despite these small differences, the strawberry and blood are still similar in a respect, since both fall within a specific range of measurements relative to the unit of measurement; in this instance, the unit of measurement would be a wavelength 1 nanometer long, and the approximate range of red color is 700-635nm.

Though we can quantitatively specify this measurement similarity conceptually, this was at first only perceived. We did not need to know the specific measurements of the redness of the apple versus the redness of the strawberry in order to observe their similarity. Furthermore, we were able to distinguish red objects from blue objects long before we had a means of

conceptually measuring this difference. Indeed, we need not even know *how* we would go about measuring such a difference, as evidenced by the fact that man was able to distinguish individual colors hundreds of years before a scientific, conceptual process made it clear to him that the nature of these differences rested in their quantitative differences relative to a single unit of measurement.

The process of perceiving similarities forms the basis for the process of abstraction, which Rand describes as “a selective mental focus that takes out or separates a certain attribute from the entities possessing it.”<sup>9</sup> While an animal can only see the totality of the universe acting as one single unity, man can use his cognitive powers to mentally isolate certain aspects of reality from the whole. When watching a child run, we can abstract the motion--running--from the particular entity involved in that action, just as we can abstract the attribute ‘red’ from particular red objects. This does not mean, however, that there is such a thing as ‘redness,’ which somehow exist apart from red objects. All that exists are particular red things, and man’s unique means of awareness allows him to abstract redness from these particulars. The nature of essences such as ‘redness,’ ‘manness,’ etc. will be discussed below in greater detail.

Now, we cannot perceive similarities and differences at random. The relationships and characteristics that we perceive are not invented, but are objective qualities that inhere in the nature of reality as perceived by our consciousness. Rand observes that we cannot perceive similarities between objects unless they have *commensurable* properties, that is, properties that share the same unit of measurement. There is, for example, no unit of measurement that applies to both heavy objects and to blue objects, and, since isolation on the basis of similarity is a

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



necessary component of the process of concept formation, there is no concept distinguishing these kinds of objects from one another. By contrast, the fact that colors are commensurable with one another allows us to have a plethora of concepts that differentiate their specific measurements from one another.

Rand formalizes these observations with the introduction of what she calls the Conceptual Common Denominator, or CCD: “the characteristic(s) reducible to a unit of measurement, by means of which man differentiates two or more existents from other existents possessing it.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the length of reflected lightwaves is the CCD for concepts of color, and our specific differentiations of color come from specific ranges of measurement within the CCD. It is critical to bear in mind that differentiations are based on *ranges* of measurement, not single, discrete dividing thresholds. This is the reason for the gradual change of colors on the color wheel, rather than something resembling a pie chart. The range of measurements that correspond to red color overlap somewhat with those that correspond with orange color, creating what is usually known as the ‘border line case.’<sup>11</sup>

### Integration

Having analyzed the nature of isolation, based on the process of abstraction and perceived similarities, we are now able to discuss what Rand sees as the second aspect of concept formation, namely the process of integration. We cannot form concepts by merely noting a host of differences; we need to integrate, to blend, these differences into a single mental unit, such that it can be easily retained and recalled when necessary.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Rand discusses the nature of these cases at some length. See *Ibid*, 72-74.

As we saw, isolation occurs when one is able to perceive that two objects have a similar range of measurements relative to the CCD. Integration is achieved by *omitting* the specific measurements within the general range of measurements that one initially apprehended. The principle is that the object must possess *some* quantitative relationship to the unit of measurement, but that it may possess *any* quantitative relationship, within a given range.<sup>12</sup>

Take, for example, forming the concept of ‘color.’ We first observe similarities between all colored objects, the result of our perception of the commensurability of all such objects relative to the length of a lightwave. We then designate ‘color’ as that property which is quantitatively related to the CCD, i.e. the length of the lightwave. For an object to have color, it must reflect light of *some* wavelength, but such reflection can be of *any* wavelength. We omit the specific measurements of the relation, which allows us to perceive new colors without having to deliberate as to whether or not such a new experience is actually an example of color, or of something else entirely. If we have never perceived the peculiar hue of chartreuse before, the first experience of such a color is not a philosophical mystery, since our process of forming the concept of color did not specify any exact measurements. This allows for the open-ended nature of concepts, which grants us the ability to constantly discover new information about the units we have conceptualized. If our concepts did not omit measurements, every new existent would be, in effect, an unprecedented phenomenon; every slight difference in hue or shade would be cause for confusion, since it would necessarily be beyond the bounds of our hyper-specified measurements. In other words, concepts would be virtually useless as cognitive tools.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

When omitting measurements, our minds do not just omit *some* measurements, but *all* measurements, those both known and unknown. When forming the concept ‘man,’ for example, early Medieval scholars had little to no idea about the internal organ structure of the human body, but this does not mean that their concept of ‘man’ was different from that of Renaissance humanists, when man’s anatomic structure was seriously studied for the first time. The Medievalists had *implicitly* omitted the measurements of such human characteristics as internal organ structure, and so, when such new knowledge about man was discovered, there was no need to create an entirely new concept. Renaissance men and women simply expanded their understanding of the concept ‘man,’ and we now know that the concept subsumes humans with a great variety of internal organ structure, and therefore that this concept omits all particular measurements of such structure; a human must have internal organs to *some* degree, but he can have some variation in that degree, analogous to the fact that red color exists in a range of measurements. Indeed, what makes concepts useful cognitive tools is precisely this: that they are not limited to the context of knowledge in which they are initially formed, but are able to be expanded as human knowledge grows. Thus, every concept condenses an extraordinary, almost unfathomable number of measurements.

We are now in a position to fully understand Rand’s formulation of the definition of a concept: “a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with their particular measurements omitted.”<sup>13</sup> Note that the definition combines both elements of concept formation: the units are said to have a distinguishing characteristic, thus accounting for the process of isolation, but the specific measurements of this

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

distinguishing characteristic are not specified, allowing for the process of integration. But integration and isolation are not the only processes involved in concept formation; there are two more steps to properly forming a concept, which we will need to discuss in order for our aesthetic theory to hold any logical force.

### Word Association

After isolating and integrating, man must then associate his particular concept with a word. Recall our earlier premise that abstractions as such do not exist, only concrete objects. This implies that to make an abstraction fully real, we must give it a concrete form, and this, according to Rand, is the nature and function of language. “Language is a code of visual-auditory symbols that serves the psycho-epistemological function of converting concepts into the mental equivalent of concretes.”<sup>14</sup>

Language is indispensable to the proper functioning of our minds, since every concept we form contains an enormous wealth of information. Every act of integration, as we discussed earlier, condenses an extraordinary amount of data, a consequence of measurement omission. Without the ability to associate this vast trove of information with a single, perceptible concrete, man would be cognitively lost. Imagine the impossibility of attempting to summon to the mind every observed human one had met, having to re-engage in the process of isolation and integration every time one wished to think about man. Rather than that virtually impossible task, humans are instead able to condense this data into a single symbol, the word “man.” This is, in essence, the meaning of the Rand’s notion of ‘unit-economy.’ It refers to the means by which

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

concepts, words, and (as we are about to see) definitions reduce enormous amounts of information into easily retainable mental units. As will be seen later in the argument, the concept of unit-economy also has important implications for the nature and function of art as well.

### Definition

Definition is the last and perhaps most crucial stage of concept formation according to Rand's theory. Definitions are statements that name the essential properties of the referents of the concept which it defines. This indicates a crucial difference between Rand's epistemology and that of many other theorists: the meaning of a concept is, for her, not the *definition* but the *referent* of the concept. Words are symbols for concepts, and the meaning of a concept is that to which it refers in reality. Thus, definitions are the means by which we "distinguish a concept from all other concepts and thus...keep its units differentiated from all other existents."<sup>15</sup>

The process of forming a definition derives from the process of concept formation--the acts of differentiation and integration. The specific range of measurements that differentiates the units in question become the differentia of the definition and the other existents possessing a different range of measurements within the CCD are the existents in the genus.<sup>16</sup> Thus, definitions differentiate objects while indicating their relationship to a wider field of existents that are similar in a crucial respect, but not in an epistemologically fundamental one. For example, in the classic definition of man, "rational" is the differentia, and "animal" is the genus. The CCD is the nature of consciousness, and the differences of measurement are not made in terms of numerical relationships to concrete attributes (such as the length of a lightwave) but

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

rather to the range of abstractions that are able to be performed. In the most cursory of terms, Rand would argue that consciousness is an active process of awareness, and that the range of measurements that differentiate one type of consciousness from another are based upon the ability to abstract and condense information given in perceptual terms to wider and wider applications. Man's method of conceptualization has a radically greater degree of abstraction than those of other animals, and this serves to differentiate him from all others within his genus, i.e. all other animals.

Recalling her discussion of the function of language and unit-economy of measurement omission, Rand argues that *the* crucial function of definitions is to condense enormous amounts of information into single, compact statements, allowing us to expand the range of our awareness beyond the concretes given to us in immediate perception. But the means by which definitions do this are, of course, different from that of words or integration. Definitions condense the *essential* information about a group of existents into a single statement, allowing us to instantly recall to our minds that which differentiates these kinds of entities from all others. "The concept condenses its referents, reduces them to a single mental unit; the definition then condenses their known characteristics; it reduces these to a single statement."<sup>17</sup>

According to Rand, what is considered to be an essential property is a matter of context. Definitions do not name timeless, unchanging, absolute essences that somehow inhere in the object, which we somehow "intuit" when forming a concept of that object. Definitions are *epistemological tools* of categorization, meaning they are the result of man's consciousness focusing on reality in a specific way. All a definition can do is indicate the distinguishing

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<sup>17</sup> Peikoff, 108.

properties of an object within a given context of knowledge; should this context expand, the definition may no longer prove to be valid and therefore will need to be expanded accordingly. To make this clear, consider Rand's example of forming the concept 'man.'<sup>18</sup> A child will first define man to be "a thing that moves and makes sounds." Within its very limited field of awareness, this is a valid definition. It distinguishes man from all the other existents of which the infant is aware, namely inanimate objects. But then, as the child discovers the existence of cats and dogs, his definition becomes invalid. Man moves and makes noises, but so do cats and dogs; yet, there is something fundamentally different about these two kinds of creatures. Man can do all manner of activities that cats and dogs are unable to perform. Thus, the child implicitly updates his definition of man to be 'a living thing that walks on two legs and has no fur.'

Then, as he attains a wider context of knowledge in adolescence, he realizes this definition also becomes invalid. Not all humans are able to walk, for example, and perhaps the adolescent's dog has been trained to walk on its hind legs. Furthermore, the child realizes that there is a vast array of activities that man engages in, some of which are common to most, but perhaps not all, and some are performed by animals as well, such as maintaining a family or even using tools. There is, however, something radically different about man and all other animals--he can do all sorts of things that other animals cannot. He can build nuclear power plants, construct space shuttles, compose symphonies, and make wrist watches. The question for the adolescent, and for any thinker approaching an adult level of awareness, is "what is the fundamental aspect of man's nature that underlies all of these activities, explaining the greatest number of them?" At

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<sup>18</sup> Rand, *Introduction*, 43-45.

this stage, the definition is revised once more to reflect the definition of man with which we are all familiar, that of a “rational animal.”

The upshot of this thought experiment is to demonstrate that definitions, and therefore essences, are not timeless and unchanging, nor are they arbitrary. They are contextual absolutes, taking into account all of the relevant information that an individual may have at a given time, and stating that which differentiates the objects in question from all others in the given field of awareness. The child’s early definitions of man were correct identifications of facts, since man does move, make noises, and walk, even though these are not his essential, defining characteristics. Definitions take into account all of these nonessential properties, but only explicates the one(s) that, in the given context of knowledge, will differentiate the units in question from all others. To repeat, then, ‘essential’ is an epistemological, not a metaphysical concept. “The metaphysical referent of man’s concept is not a special, separate metaphysical essence, but the *total* of the facts of reality he has observed, and this total determines which characteristics of a given group of existents he designates as *essential*.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, definitions are not, in any sense of the phrase, *a priori*. They are condensations of empirical observations. “As a legal preamble (referring here to *epistemological* law), every definition begins with the implicit proposition: ‘After full consideration of all the known facts pertaining to this group of existents, the following has been demonstrated to be their essential, therefore defining, characteristic...’”<sup>20</sup> Just as with integration and word association, definitions serve to condense information, allowing us to quickly and easily grasp differences and similarities between objects. We can see that unit-economy pervades every aspect of our

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 48.



processes of concept formation. Indeed, this is, in Rand's theory, the basic function of concepts: to allow humans to attain ever-widening scopes of awareness by condensing enormous amounts of data into single, discrete concretes. Words are condensations of concepts, while definitions are condensations of the *identity* of concepts. Since the nature of the concept's referents is what gives the concept its meaning and content, the identity of the concept is, in fact, the identity of the referents. Definitions explicate this identity in an economic way by providing a statement of the essential properties of the referents, leaving the manifold of non-essential properties implied and unstated.

One of the many virtue's of Rand's epistemology is that, like the theories of such American Pragmatists as Peirce, James, and Dewey, it highlights the practical nature of concepts and definitions. There is too often a tendency among both philosophers and laymen alike to view a definition as something arbitrarily constructed, a point of contention and intellectual sparring for indolent ivory-tower intellectuals. But definitions play a crucial function in maintaining the order of our mental classifications, and therefore in our ability to act and function in the world. We apprehend reality by means of the unit-perspective, and concept-formation is our means of organizing the data we apprehend. To borrow an analogy from one Rand scholar, concepts may best be analogized to folders: the particular contents of the folders will vary from individual to individual, depending on the range of their knowledge. Definitions are the labels that we put on the folders and, just as any business or bank would not last more than a few days without an efficient filing system for their data, so, too, with man's mind.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peikoff, 104-105.

To take one of the most obvious examples, the definition of what is ‘good’ is of profound importance to human action, and the consequences of certain definitions have been played out with tragic results in human history, while others have led to heroic and awe-inspiring action. It is readily perceived that an individual that believes it is good--morally good--to think, to use his rationality to the best of his ability, would act in a manner far different from one who was brought up to believe that ethics requires man to have faith, to feel something is true rather than logically know it to be so. The contrast between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages is enough to illustrate the nature of the actions one could expect from such individuals.

Rand’s theory implies that it is not uniquely in the field of ethics that definitions must be rigorously applied and analyzed, but to all of man’s higher level, abstract activities. Friendship, love, justice, politics, government, and--of course--art are just a few examples of the elements of human life that are simultaneously the most important and the least understood. Just as there are definite, practical consequences to adopting any given definition of ‘the good’ (or adopting no definition whatsoever, but living by the whim of the moment), so there are also equally important practical consequences for having certain definitions of ‘art’ (or, again, refusing to formulate one explicitly). What the nature of these practical consequences are and how they stem from the nature and function of art will become clear as the argument progresses, but we can already see here that there is no option to simply throw our hands up and declare ourselves radical subjectivists, eschewing definitions as arbitrary and useless. To do so would be to declare man’s mind itself useless, thereby negating all grounds for debate at all.

For these reasons, we will ground our aesthetic inquiry on Rand’s epistemological premises. The definition of ‘art’ that we will eventually formulate will not name an unchanging

essence, but will identify the key differentiating elements of art that distinguish it from all other types of existents in its genus. This is quite different from the approach of many traditional theorists, who, following Platonic metaphysics, attempted to define ‘art’ by means of a special, suprasensible essence somehow subsisting in every instantiation of art. While this approach has been rejected by many modern theorists, they have substituted an equally improper epistemological standard, that is, none whatsoever. Rather than claiming that definitions of art reveal intrinsic essences, they argue that it is a matter of subjective preference, whether on an individual, cultural, or institutional level.

Rand’s theory seeks to steer a middle-course between these two alternatives, arguing that art’s essence is neither intrinsic nor subjective, but objective, meaning the result of a careful consideration of all the evidence in a given context, and identifying the criterion of differentiation within that context--i.e., the specific range of measurements relative to the CCD, which serves to both distinguish art from other existents and unite it within a broader group of existents within its genus. We must, of course, first discern what precisely the genus of the definition of art is, and, correlatively, the commensurable characteristic by means of which we classify these units as part of the same genus in the first place. Furthermore, we will identify the unit of measurement according to which we will distinguish art from all other similar existents, and only then will we have enough information to properly form the definition of ‘art.’

The next stage of our project, then, will direct us toward gaining an understanding of the genus and the CCD. Before we can differentiate art from other existents, we must first understand what those other existents in the genus might be. As we will see, the genus of art is derived from the peculiar nature of man’s defining feature, his rational mind. It is time, then, to

turn away from Rand, and look to Langer's theory of symbolism for a robust conception of the human mind's wondrously complex functions.

## Chapter 2: Mind As Symbolizer

In many ways, Langer's theory augments and bolsters the claims made by Rand's. Both philosophers concern themselves with certain aspects of the nature and functioning of the human mind, but while Rand's epistemology looks to higher-level processes such as concept-formation and definition, Langer's excavates the foundation upon which such higher functioning is built, namely the process of symbolization. Understanding what symbols are--and why they are preconditions of not only thought and reason, but of *any* experience at all--will assist us in our effort to define art by laying down the groundwork for the genus of the concept's definition.

In keeping with Rand's observation that concept formation depends on both isolation and integration, we will approach the question of the nature of symbolism by first understanding what it is *not*; according to Langer, symbols must be isolated and differentiated from something similar yet distinct, namely signs, which she defines as that which "indicates the existence--past, present, or future--of a thing, event, or condition."<sup>22</sup> For example, the smell of woodsmoke outside during the wintertime in a small village may be a sign that someone has lit their fireplace. The smell of the smoke is interpreted by a thinking subject to be an indication of the existence of something which is not directly perceptible. All that the subject can directly apprehend in this example is the smell of smoke, but his knowledge of past events allows him to link the immediate sense data to something beyond it. He knows, from past experiences, that the smell of woodsmoke is an indication that a fire is burning nearby, and his experiences of the cold of winter and the human desire to maintain warmth all coalesce into a conjecture that the smoke is a sign of such an occurrence.

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<sup>22</sup> Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 57.

Signs are generally used as guides to immediate practical action.<sup>23</sup> We understand that the sign is an indicator of something else that is generally forthcoming or already present. Thus, the sound of a doorbell is a sign that somebody wishes to speak with us, and so we use the sound as a guide to action; depending upon our mood and constitution, we may either choose to walk to the door to investigate, or muffle all sounds in the house to give the appearance of not being home. Either way, the fact that is driving our action--that there is somebody outside who wishes our attention--is not immediately perceivable, but only mediately, through the sign of the doorbell's sound.

Symbols, by contrast, are not indicators of an immediately present object, nor are they guides to immediate practical action. Symbols represent objects *in absentia*, allowing man to think about, rather than react to, the existence of that object. In Langer's words, "the sign is something to act upon, or a means to command action; the symbol is an instrument of thought."<sup>24</sup> Signs serve as proxies for the objects that they signify, while symbols are "vehicles for the conception of objects."<sup>25</sup> For example, hearing the footfalls of my brother outside my bedroom door would signify his presence. I would know, by the sounds of his steps, that he is immediately outside of my door, and I could act accordingly. His name, however, *symbolizes* his existence, as opposed to *signifying* it. Saying his name does not mean he is immediately at hand, but rather allows me to think of him, to conceptualize his existence. Such is the nature and function of a symbol.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

The question of what a symbol or a sign *means* is of crucial importance. Since we are here endeavoring to discover what the word ‘art’ means, an understanding of Langer’s theory of meaning will be greatly beneficial. “Meaning is not a quality, but a *function* of a term. A function is a *pattern* viewed with reference to one special term round which it centers; this pattern emerges when we look at the given term *in its total relation to the other terms about it.*”<sup>26</sup> Let us unpack this observation.

Meaning does not occur in a vacuum, but in a specific context, a specific pattern. In the simplest terms, as Langer points out, the term which has meaning must bear some sort of relationship to both a subject to whom it means, and to an object, which is that which is meant. There are, then, two different senses of the term meaning, which Langer explicitly identifies. If we say that a term *T* ‘means’ an object to the subject *S*, we are speaking of what Langer calls the “logical meaning” of a term.<sup>27</sup> For example, for myself as the subject, the term ‘Dante’ has two logical meanings: the first is the one which is shared by most other thinking subjects in the West, namely the reference to the great Italian poet who wrote the *Divine Comedy*. The other meaning, however, is unique to me and my family, since it also means (that is, refers to) my pet dog. Thus, speaking of the logical meaning of a term clearly presupposes a subject with a particular context of knowledge, which is used to determine the object to which the term refers. This points to a broader fact about meaning, which is that there is no intrinsic meaning to any term, only its relation to a subject and a class of objects. Meaning is, then, a tripartite relation between subject, term, and object. None of these may be omitted if meaning is to be retained. In this sense, Langer’s understanding of meaning is quite similar to Rand’s emphasis on the contextual nature

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<sup>26</sup> 55

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of definitions, since both are predicated on the belief that the presence of a subject with a particular context of knowledge is integral to the nature of the meaning of a term or concept.

Langer also discusses a second sense of the word “meaning,” which is the “psychological” sense--saying that subject *S* means a certain object by term *T*. To return to our example above, we would say that I, the subject, could mean one of two different things when I use the term ‘Dante,’ either to refer to my dog or the Renaissance poet. This would be to discuss the psychological meaning of the term ‘Dante,’ and this is not too different from explicating the logical meaning of the same term. As Langer points out, the differences between the two senses of the word ‘meaning’ are dependent upon whichever of the terms one uses as the locus of attention. For the logical meaning, the tripartite pattern of meaning is construed in terms of the term’s relation to an object, as conceived by a subject. For the psychological meaning, the relation is explicated with respect to the subject’s context of knowledge and intention with respect to his or her use of a term relative to a given object or class of objects.

In either case, it is crucial to note that that there is a specific, objectified existent *T* that is *independent* of the object to which *S* refers, and yet is able to somehow connote it or denote it, depending on the nature of the term.<sup>28</sup> Rand’s theory can augment our understanding of this relation between term, object, and subject. Her theory of concept formation by measurement omission seeks to bridge the subject-object gap, indicating the metaphysical basis upon which our ability to associate terms and objects is based; we associate a term with a class of objects in accordance with the commensurability (i.e. similarity) obtaining between each of the objects in that class, and we then proceed to integrate these objects into a single mental unit by omitting the

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<sup>28</sup> In essence, Langer argues that signs primarily denote, while symbols connote, and then denote. See *Ibid*, 63-64.



specific measurements of those commensurable characteristics. As will frequently be the case, Langer's and Rand's theories here work together in a symbiotic relationship, mutually reinforcing the points of the other.

One more aspect of the nature of meaning must be emphasized, and that is the fact that there is a critical difference between the term and the object that is associated with the term. "The difference is, that the subject for which they constitute a pair must *find one more interesting than the other, and the latter more easily available than the former.*"<sup>29</sup> To work with Langer's example, in the case where lightning precedes thunder we would take the former as a sign for the forthcoming existence of the latter. We are not able to perceive the thunder as easily as we can perceive the lightning, and so we use the the latter to signify the former. Of course, if the situation were different, and we were unable to see the lightning--say because were in the thicket of a forest--then we would use the thunder as a sign for the existence of lightning which preceded it. This difference shows us that, absent a thinking subject to interpret the sign's relation to an object, the two have no intrinsic relation to each other. They are associated by a human mind, and this association can take a variety of forms. The lightning-thunder relation is one of temporality and cause and effect; one comes before the other as the cause, and the subsequent existence of the latter is interpreted as an effect. The ease with which we are able to perceive that which comes first is the criterion by means of which we decide to use the antecedent as a sign for the forthcoming existence of the consequent.

This is, however, only one of several possible means whereby a subject associates a term with an object, or class of objects. Using Rand's theory of concept formation, we can see another

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

possible method of association, namely the process of associating a visual-auditory symbol (i.e., a word) with a concept in order to concretize the latter. This association is radically different from the cause-effect or temporal relation of the lightning and the thunder; clearly the existence of the word is neither the cause nor the effect of the existence of the objects to which it refers. The principle according to which we use a term to signify the object, however, remains the same. The word 'man' is easily retainable and more readily at hand as a symbol than, say, an actual man; it would be of little benefit to the human mind if we could only symbolize our concept of man by means of the visual presentation of one such man. Thus, we use the relatively uninteresting symbol 'man' to refer to a class of objects which are all related in some fundamental way, as discussed in Chapter 1.

The upshot of this discussion is this: that in order to establish the precise nature of the association between term and object, one must have a specific context of knowledge established. We must know both what the term in question is, and what the subject knows about the existents to which he is attempting to refer by means of the term, which could be either a sign or a symbol. The lightning itself is the term in the first example, and it is a signifier of the presence of thunder, which the subject knows by means of his knowledge of cause and effect generally, and weather patterns in particular. In the process of forming the concept 'man,' however, the visual-auditory symbol 'man' is the term--which, in this case, is a symbol--and its relation to the objects to which it is meant to refer is one based on the subject's ability to abstract essential properties from the existents of which he is aware. This relation is one based on epistemological essences, while the former relation was one of temporality and causation. In either case, the crucial point is that

one could not specify an intrinsic meaning to either the sign (the lightening) or the symbol (“man”) without reference to a particular subject and his context of knowledge.

The above observation is based implicitly on Rand’s theory of the function of measurement, namely to expand the range of man’s awareness through relating existence to anthropocentric units of measurement. Lightning, in the first case, was the “unit of measurement” (broadly construed) by means of which we measured the existence of the thunder. It was readily perceptible by man and was used to refer to something which was not as readily perceptible, namely the thunder. So, too, with the symbol “man.” The word is easily stored, articulated, and written down by the human organism, and so it serves as the perfect anthropocentric means of distilling our knowledge of reality into a manageable form. In both cases, our ability to interpret signs and symbols in such a manner rests on the fact that one of the two in the pair was more easily perceived than the other, exemplifying man’s ability to relate that which is more abstract or removed from his field of immediate awareness to that which is closer.

### The Phenomenology of Symbolization

According to Langer’s theory, symbolization does not simply underly some aspects of man’s mental life, but is, in fact, the grounding for virtually all of its existence. “It is not the essential act of thought that is symbolization, but an act *essential to thought*, and prior to it.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, even though it may seem that we can easily equate Langer’s notion of symbol with Rand’s understanding of the nature of a concept, the relation between them is anything but simple equivalence. For Rand, concepts were tools of thought only: they were the means by which man

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

organizes his data, classifying and cross-classifying the various concretes he encounters. For Langer, there are many more sides to symbolization than simply thought, among them being the basis of our phenomenological experience.

Our ideas are not formed merely by combining or associating sense data. This Lockean notion is far too simplistic for Langer's theory, as she argues that "the material furnished by the senses is constantly wrought into *symbols*, which are our elementary ideas."<sup>31</sup> This is, then, a fundamentally Kantian point, that we instantly and automatically transform our sensations into distinct *objects*, rather than simply experiencing a barrage of pure data. For example, when I perceive the pencil upon my desk, the various sensations of which it is made--the color, texture, shape, extension, weight, etc.--are integrated into a single perception, instantaneously. Then, when I see that same pencil from a different angle, at a different point in time, I can recognize it as the same object. I symbolized my experience of the pencil during my first encounter with it, and this provided a schema of sorts, according to which I am able to judge my subsequent experiences. This is an example of what Langer calls "abstractive seeing," which is "the foundation of our rationality, and is its definite guarantee long before the dawn of any conscious generalization or syllogism."<sup>32</sup>

This abstractive seeing allows us to negotiate our way around the problem that we never truly experience the same phenomenon twice, since, at minimum, the second experience occurs at a different time from the first. There are, additionally, a whole host of other factors that may make the subsequent experience even more different from the first, such as a different angle of perception, lighting changes, and even subjective mood shifts that alter the way in which we see

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

and experience objects. Thus, Langer argues that “so-called repeated experiences are really *analogous* occurrences, all fitting a form that was abstracted on that first occasion.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, experience is simply a selective retention of certain occurrences, allowing us associate similar occurrences with the first “prototype” occurrence. In my first encounter with the pencil, I may have abstracted certain of its key features, like its shape and color. I may not have abstracted the particular brand of the pencil, whether it was facing toward me or away from me, or the exact shade of its lead. These latter observations are not, so to speak, phenomenologically essential, and I can recognize the same pencil without having retained these specific qualities.

These observations about the nature of abstractive seeing (which also equally apply to abstractive hearing, tasting, feeling, etc.) readily integrate with Rand’s observations concerning abstraction--that it is a selective mental focus on certain attributes or elements of the totality of the concretes we experience. While Langer’s theory endorses this conclusion, it also takes it a step further: it recognizes that abstraction doesn’t merely underly concept formation, but all experience as such. “The activity of our senses is ‘mental’ not only when it reaches the brain, but in its very inception, whenever the alien world outside impinges on the furthest and smallest receptor.”<sup>34</sup> The very process of sensation then, is an active process, one of selective focus; it results in a schema of experience, with certain details omitted and certain details retained. It is by means of such selective abstraction that man apprehends his world, both conceptually and perceptually.

This mode of awareness is highly reminiscent of Rand’s discussion of the nature of units. She argues, like Langer, that we do not experience each object as an unprecedented phenomenon,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

but rather as an existent within a larger context of similar and dissimilar existents. Langer's account of the nature of our perception of objects is similar in all essential respects to Rand's treatment of the subject of units, as she argues that "an object is not a datum, but a form construed by the sensitive and intelligent organ, a form which is at once an experienced individual thing and a symbol for the concept of it, for *this sort of thing*."<sup>35</sup> Both authors accord on this matter, and it is of use to nestle Rand's theory of unit perception into Langer's broader theory of mind, as the two are highly compatible with one another.

### Unit Economy of Symbols

Another point of contact between Langer's and Rand's theories is their similar perspectives on the unit economy of using symbols.<sup>36</sup> Langer approaches the issue by contrasting the efficacy of hieroglyphic symbolization with discursive, verbal symbolization. The former is able to present many relations simultaneously, in a single act of perception, while the latter strings out these relations in a succession of words, in accordance with proper grammatical form. For this reason, pictorial symbolization cannot clearly articulate abstract phenomena such as causality, or changes in space and time. If I wished to express the sentence "I read a book" in pictorial form, I may be able to do so with a fair degree of ease, but if I wished to so express the sentence "After spending a long day out in the fields, I decided that it would be pleasant to unwind in front of the warmth of my fire, and so I read a book," I would have considerable difficulty, if completing the task is even within the realm of possibility.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 73-74.

Because words are symbols that pinpoint relations--tying such high level abstractions to discrete, perceptible symbols-- they allow for a much broader scope of awareness and articulation than pictorial representations do. In Langer's words, "The trick of naming relations instead of illustrating them gives language a tremendous scope; one word can thus take care of a situation that would require a whole sheet of drawings to depict it."<sup>37</sup> Thus, just like Rand's concepts, Langer's symbols also expand man's scope of awareness beyond that which he can apprehend in one field of vision. This is, then, something of an inversion of the oft-quoted adage that "a picture is worth a thousand words;" here, Langer is arguing, in a sense, that "a word is worth a thousand pictures."

This property becomes of even greater importance when considering the fact that man's consciousness--indeed, any form of consciousness--is limited in the number of things it can apprehend at one time. When presented with a large array of perceptual objects, beyond a certain number we cannot perceive anything distinct, but simply a general notion of 'many.' For example we can readily perceive that there are only two stars in the following array (\*\*) but it would take conscious, deliberate, conceptual counting to apprehend the number in this array (\*\*\*\*\*). We cannot grasp the sum without recourse to conceptual level abstractions and such higher level symbols as numbers. Each number condenses a certain quantity of concretes into a single mental unit, allowing us to conceptually retain that which we could never perceptually apprehend. We can retain the concept "12" with ease, but apprehending that the array of stars above adds up to 12 distinct concretes is beyond the scope of our perceptual abilities. Rand discusses this same phenomenon, arguing that "this fact is the best demonstration

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

of the cognitive role of concepts.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, for both philosophers, the fact that concepts (and the symbols we associate with them) are able to condense enormous amounts of empirical data into discrete, perceptible units is of crucial importance to man’s cognitive functioning.

There is, however, a high price to be paid for the ability to name relations. Words are a double-edged sword--they can concretize highly abstract relations and relations between relations, but at the cost of being unable to symbolize, in a single presentation, a complicated array of differing relations. Think of all the data nested within a single painting, such as Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Socrates*. It is, of course, a reference to a specific and concrete event in the history of intellectual thought, something which, on its own, would require a hefty amount of linguistic symbolization to capture. But then there are the varying reactions to the the event by each of the figures in the painting, the mood given to us by the lighting and the setting, the exquisitely precise stylistic detail. We can, of course, attempt to capture each of these properties in linguistic form, but there is a sizable problem with this: it would require an enormous number of linguistic symbols to approximate that which is given to us in the painting. Just as man is limited in the number of perceptual objects he can hold in his grasp at one time, so he is limited in the number of *conceptual* objects can simultaneously grasp as well. A lengthy discursive rendition of *The Death of Socrates* would not be able to be held in one’s awareness, since the sheer number of symbols is too great.

What would be missing in the verbal description, but eloquently present in the painting, is the *simultaneity* of the events and properties, all given in a single perception. Rather than scanning through pages upon pages of verbiage, assembling our understanding of the painting

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<sup>38</sup> Rand, *Introduction*, 63.



piece-meal through reasoning and verbal understanding, the painting delivers its message in a single concrete, completely bypassing the need for words. Thus, words are both incredibly useful tools of cognition, but certainly not the only (or even the most efficient) means of symbolizing. Returning the adage introduced above, we are now able to understand that although a word may be worth a thousand pictures, it is still equally true that “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

### Discursive vs Non-Discursive Symbolization

Implicit in the above discussion is the final aspect of Langer’s theory that must be addressed, which will serve as the bridge linking our epistemological theorizing to our interests in aesthetics, namely her distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbolization.

“Discursiveness” refers to the property of any given language that requires the symbols to be strung out one after the other in order to articulate states of affairs that happened

“simultaneously.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the sentence “I read a book” renders into discursive form the fact that my reading took place simultaneously with the book. The sentence structure places the book sequentially after my reading, and yet this is nevertheless indicative of the actual state of affairs; the sequential ordering of terms in a sentence is related to, but not directly correlated with, the temporal ordering of the events or existents the sentence seeks to articulate: although the book did not ‘come after’ my reading of it, that is nevertheless the accurate way to sequentialize the terms in the sentence to convey the simultaneity of the actual experience. This observation sheds new light on our discussion above of the high “price” of using words as symbols: the enormous benefits accrued by using this mode of symbolization--the ability to name complex relations and

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<sup>39</sup> Langer, 81.

high level abstractions--are balanced out by the fact that any state of affairs or facts of reality that cannot be rendered in discursive form cannot be articulated by language.

Langer adduces many examples of experiences that cannot be discursively symbolized, and argues that these experiences are not, for this reason, non-rational or mystical. In other words, she seeks to challenge the common notion held by certain linguistic analysts such as Bertrand Russell that “all articulate symbolism is discursive.”<sup>40</sup> For example, as we discussed earlier, the fact that the senses are actively forming objects as they encounter the raw data that bombards them means that they are rendering sensations into such discrete elements of perception as--in the visual mode--line, color, form, and shape. These aspects of existence are very poorly captured by language in certain cases, and in some cases simply inexpressible. For an example of the first case, we may refer to our above discussion of the attempt to linguistically capture everything that is contained within the painting *The Death of Socrates*. We can certainly approximate the experience of apprehending this object, but only extremely poorly; the sensory-level symbols that we generate in the process of apprehending the piece must be experienced first-hand in order to *fully* understand the unique array of colors, lines, and forms that constitute this or any other painting.

The second kind of case is one in which the object literally cannot be articulated in discursive form at all; one simply needs to apprehend the existent in some other way to come to an even rudimentary understanding of it. For example, one cannot describe the color blue to a blind person. They need to experience this phenomenon with their senses, since no amount of discursive symbolism can articulate the nature of blue color. Allow me to briefly clarify a

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

potential misapprehension: we may certainly be able describe to the blind person the physical *causes* of blue color, i.e. the specific range of lightwaves that are reflected off of the object, but this is not the same as describing what blue color *is*. Fundamentally, blue is a *form* of perception, resulting from the interaction between human consciousness and a specific kind of object; describing the cause of this form of perception is quite distinct from describing the form of perception itself. Indeed, while the former is able to be linguistically rendered, the latter is not. Analogously, while we can very poorly approximate the nature of *The Death of Socrates* in linguistic form, we cannot even begin to so capture the nature of blue color using such a mode of symbolism. Objects and experiences such as these are integral to much of human life, yet they can only be fully apprehended by non-discursive means.

As one more example of such non-discursive experiences, consider the ever flowing, protean nature of emotion. We cannot accurately and precisely render these experiences into linguistic form without recourse to tawdry generalities, or verbose, virtually incomprehensible prose. Yet, according to Langer, “feelings have definite forms,” and therefore they must have meaning, since meaning is, on this view, an essentially formal phenomenon; consequently, there must be an alternate, non-discursive mode of symbolization for these phenomena.<sup>41</sup>

Based on arguments made by J.E. Creighton, Langer argues that these experiences, sheerly by dint of being constituents of our mental life, are *ipso facto* rational elements. “What falls in any way within experience partakes of the rational form of the mind.”<sup>42</sup> This requires a significant broadening of the traditional understanding of the nature of rationality, as we usually confine it to mere discursive reasoning and so-called left brain activities. This is, however, unfair

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 99, quote by Creighton.

to those other crucial elements of human existence (the right brain activities, among others). This is one of the many virtues of Langer's philosophy: it broadens our perspective on the nature of rationality and mind, encompassing not simply syllogistic, discursive reasoning and concept formation, but also emotional, aesthetic, and sensory aspects of our mental life as well. Each of these elements fall under the purview of symbolism, though they do so in slightly different ways. Chapter 1 has already indicated the relation between symbolism and concept formation, since words are the concretization of the concepts we form, and therefore serve as the symbols for them. The rest of this paper will be addressing itself to the question of the relation between symbolism and other forms of human experience apart from concept formation, i.e. those aesthetic and other non-discursive elements of mental life that cannot, in their totality, be fully captured by language.<sup>43</sup>

### Ritual and Play

In addition to art, Langer cites ritual and play as two other powerful non-discursive means of symbolization, both of which are grounded in man's symbolic phenomenology. As we have already discussed, man's mind transforms his sense data into mental symbols during the process of rendering them as objects. Thus, after the sensations have vanished from our sense organs, we are still able to retain a mental grasp of that which we perceived.<sup>44</sup> Our visual forms of the world, then, are our most basic symbols, the vehicles for our most fundamental ideas. This is evidenced by the fact that images are so readily used as metaphors for things to which they have nothing

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<sup>43</sup> For a brief look at the question of the ontology of literary arts and whether or not they should be considered discursive, please see the conclusion of this paper, especially pp. 95-96.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

but a mere logical relation. In other words, the meaning of the symbol is not tied to the object of perception, but, through symbolic transformation and consequent use as a metaphor, comes to be tied to a whole range of differing objects, some of which are quite abstract. As Langer points out, roses are so readily coupled with notions of feminine beauty that it is difficult for us to disassociate these two notions and view the rose as simply a flower. What we come to think of as ‘the feminine’--qualities of delicacy, beauty, lushness, fragrance, luxuriousness, and a painful bite if mistreated--are all readily embodied in a single concrete, allowing us to experience this very abstract notion in a single perception. Thus, images are prime tools for metaphors, allowing extraordinary latitude in developing complex meanings and symbolizing a vast trove of data that would otherwise remain ineffable, and non-objectified.

Langer argues that, just as we almost immediately begin to string single words together into sentences to create larger complexes of meaning, so, too, we readily combine various images together into stories, painting a temporal picture of events through a succession of images in our minds.<sup>45</sup> These stories are eventually integrated with aural, kinesthetic, and other sensory elements to form what Langer calls “fantasies.”<sup>46</sup> Fantasies are more complex than stories, conveying more information and allowing for a greater scope of symbolization and awareness. Every event we apprehend is spontaneously transformed into a fantasy, which serves as a schema or map of experience. Since, as we discussed during the analysis of the phenomenology of symbolism, we never truly have the same experience twice, we are able to recognize analogous experiences as similar or “the same” because they share certain key features with the fantasy we originally abstracted from the first instance. The fantasy, then, is a selective recreation of the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

event in our minds, a retention of key elements such that they can be used to identify similar events in the future. The fact that we speak as though we have had repeated experiences, even though this is not entirely the case, is a testament to the power and efficacy of our fantasy-schema for mapping experience.

For example, imagine you are attending a symphony concert one evening, and, thrilled by the energy of the performance, you resolve to return the following evening for a repeated listening of the same program. No one would seriously argue that you are not hearing the same pieces again on the second program, even though there are an almost innumerable array of differences between the second performance and the first: more or different tuning or intonation errors, slight shifts in tempi, differing energy from a different audience, and, at the most abstract level, you the listener are at a different moment in time, having experienced and processed things that you had not been exposed to during the first hearing. All of these differences amount to a richer--or, at minimum, different--listening experience the second time around. Even so, one is able to readily identify the pieces as the same from the previous evening, largely due to the fact that our abstracted fantasy of the first hearing held certain salient features in our minds for us--features such as themes, timbres, or perhaps even conducting cues or visual patterns on the stage--and these features allow us to recognize the second hearing as essentially similar to the first. Without selective retention of experience through fantasies, we would be at a loss to map any of our experiences.

With this incredibly powerful ability to generate fantasies, what do we readily seek to symbolize first, at the most fundamental level? Langer answers that we “instinctively strive to

conceive..the experience of being alive.”<sup>47</sup> Life consists of a series of needs, things that must be had and retained to ensure our survival; we are required to engage in a constant process of action on all levels--physiological, mental, emotional--in order to maintain our existence, and so our first symbols are of those things which further our survival and well-being, i.e. our values. In trying to conceptualize, and thereby render into objective form, the multitudinous values and needs we experience as children or infants we must necessarily employ symbols in a variety of uses, exploiting their powerful capacity for metaphor. In other words, the ratio of things we wish to symbolize--the need for food, comfort, human warmth, affection, understanding, freedom, etc.--to available symbols is extraordinarily high, leading to what Langer and other anthropologists call the “vegetative state” of language and thought.<sup>48</sup> Each symbol, word or otherwise, is attempting to capture so many facets of reality that we experience our world as something like a shifting, quasi-animistic spiritual existence, one closely resembling a dream state. The shape and feel of the infant’s mother comes to be a sign for forthcoming food and nourishment, but also a symbol of stability, warmth, protection. The crib or bed is symbolic of home, rest, dominion. With obvious overlapping, each of these symbols would begin to meld into one another, since the child has not yet been able to reach the abstract level of thought by means of which he can consciously understand the variegated meanings each of his symbols holds, such understanding relying upon his as yet undeveloped linguistic faculty.

This pseudo-dream state leads to Langer’s discussion of dreams themselves, which is a key component of her argument concerning the connection between symbolization and ritual. In dreams, we do not apprehend objects as symbols, since this would require the eminently absent

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 148-49.

ability to decouple the symbol from that which it symbolizes. We are unable to recognize that, in our dream, the angry-looking dog is not actually the embodiment of a lifetime of disapproval and envy, but is simply a symbol thereof, and, of course, we react accordingly.

According to Langer, when we translate this dream epistemology into waking reality, we come to the reverence of sacra. These spiritual objects, such as the Eucharist in the Christian tradition, are inextricably linked to the abstractions they embody. The church-goer is only consuming bread and wine, yet these two objects have come to embody something much more abstract and meaningful: absolution, salvation, and eternal life. To the devout Christian, transubstantiation is real, powerful, and vital. Unlike the normal process of symbolization as outlined at the outset of this chapter, the symbol and object (here an abstraction) become fused into one, much as they are in the dream state.

Sacra are not symbolic of simply anything, nor are the objects themselves random assortments of paraphernalia. They are, most fundamentally, concerned with life and death, aspects of human existence that are profoundly important, inescapable realities that inflect much of our attitudes and actions. “The symbols that embody basic ideas of life and death, of man and the world, are naturally sacred...the contemplation of sacra invites a certain intellectual excitement--intellectual because it centers in a mental activity--the excitement of realizing life and strength, manhood, contest, and death.”<sup>49</sup> This intellectual excitement comes from symbolizing that which cannot be discursively rendered: human culture has, for the entirety of its collective existence, substituted lengthy, abstract treatises on the nature of life, death, and coming of age for the vital experience of a ritual, and with good reason. Much of these

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 151-152.



experiences cannot be fully discursively rendered, and the experience of a ritual is electrifying precisely because it is the only means of completely articulating them.

This excitement first leads to spontaneous outpourings of emotion, signifiers of the internal state of ecstasy. Joy will lead to dancing and shouting; sadness will lead to moaning, head-hanging, hair-pulling. Over time, however, these actions will become formalized, such that those who do not feel the emotions that once led to their externalization nevertheless articulate those actions, in in the spirit of symbolizing them rather than signifying them. This is what Langer calls “gesture.” The gestures are selective recreations of the spontaneous emotional acts, standardized within a culture and solidified over time. These gestures then lead, finally, to the fully fledged ritual, which Langer defines as that which results from the “formalization of overt behavior in the presence of the sacred objects.”<sup>50</sup>

Ritual ceremonies are intimately bound up with events and challenges in the lives of the worshippers. Just as sacra were not randomly arranged pieces of debris, so ritual is not simply an arbitrary slapdash of movements and feelings. The elements of ritual are *mimetic* of key, important aspects of reality in accordance with the worldview of the worshippers. For example, the retelling of stories is often a central component of ritual, one that is impossible without stylized action that selectively recreates the event in question. The pantomimed drawing of a sword or the solemn gesture of outlining the cross are examples of deliberate gestures within a ritual that mimetically embody something external to them, something of profound importance to the experience and challenge of living.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 152-153.

Langer argues that play, too, is essentially mimetic. Children at play do not engage in signification, but symbolization, and this symbolization serves as something of a training ground for the later development of mimetic ritual. “Long before men perform rites which enact the phases of life, they have learned such acting in play.”<sup>51</sup> Her conception of play borrows something from the Aristotelean premise that mimesis is a means of education, of learning about different aspects of reality. But her analysis runs deeper, arguing that at its core, play is about learning the process of mimesis itself, rather than how to achieve any particular end. If the latter were true, she argues, we would see the most common play gestures becoming more and more refined to look like their real-world counterparts; yet, the precise opposite is true. In the case of play-eating, for example, the movement of the hand to the mouth is so perfunctory, so crude, that it cannot be thought to signify the actual act of eating. Given how frequently children eat, both in play and in reality, it would seem that this gesture should be the most life-like of them all, if play were meant to educate man about reality itself.

Given that this is clearly not the case, Langer’s argument implies that one of the key reasons for engaging in play activities is to develop skills in selective recreation, which is one of the primary processes involved in symbolization. Through play we develop the mental and physical skills that are central to the later-developed skill of ritual expression. For both play and ritual, the role of selectivity and symbolization is central. Both activities focus on abstracting certain important aspects of reality and symbolizing them through stylized gesture and sound. Both of these activities are grounded in the sensory-symbolic powers of man’s consciousness, though they make use of them at a much higher level than mere perception does. And they both

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

fulfill man's need to symbolize that which cannot be fully captured by discursive symbolism. For these reasons, we will eventually incorporate ritual and play into our definition of art, as they will serve as the units within the genus of that definition.

It intuitively obvious that many of the properties we have been discussing so far in connection with ritual and play also apply to art as well. Art is clearly symbolic, and much of art is mimetic of reality, symbolizing certain aspects of existence. Whether it be a painting of a forest scene, a statue of a man, or fictional story, art symbolically renders much of human experience in non-discursive ways. Of course, art's similarity to ritual and play is not yet quite clear, and the precise nature of this similarity, as well as its essential difference, will be made plain in the coming chapters. What is crucial to understand at this stage is that the human mind is an essentially symbolizing machine, and that every one of our experiences, precisely to the degree to which it can be called an experience *at all*, necessarily was symbolized in some form, whether discursive or not. This foundational element of human mentation is the groundwork for the genus of the definition of art, which will be fully explicated in Chapter 4.

Now we will turn to Dissanayake's ethological perspective, which will begin to clarify the precise nature of the similarities between art, ritual, and play as well as the crucial differences between them. We will see what unifies them under a common CCD, and we will begin to uncover the differentia that separates each from the other.

## Chapter 3: The Bio-Evolutionary Approach

Dissanayake's explorations of ritual, art, and play are grounded in a bio-evolutionary (or, synonymously, ethological) perspective. As the name would suggest, this method of philosophical investigation relates the subject in question to larger questions of biological evolution, seeking to couch any of its conclusions within the context of scientifically validated findings concerning evolutionary theory and natural selection. Adopting aspects of this approach to our aesthetic inquiry will prove to be enormously beneficial for a number of reasons. Firstly, it will allow for a radical expansion of the range of data with which we will construct our definition. If a definition represents a condensation of a vast conglomeration of concrete information, the more data one has observed and considered, the more comprehensive and true to reality one's definition will be. This is a distinct departure from the usual methods of hashing out definitions of art, which limit themselves to a relatively small pool of concretes derived from very recent examples of avant-garde trends, such as so-called 'found-art' or other Dadaist pieces.

Just as a scientific theory that is grounded in a hopelessly small data set is bound to produce erroneous conclusions, so aesthetic theories which do not concern themselves with human aesthetic creations and activities that occurred before the times of Plato and Aristotle are bound to be based on overly-narrow, non-essential criteria. As Dissanayake cogently argues, by centering debates about the essence of art on Western, post-Platonic theories and practices, we are limiting ourselves to an infinitesimal amount of data, approximately 1/400th of our history as aesthetic organisms.<sup>52</sup> Using the ethological approach, therefore, will ground us in good

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<sup>52</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 5.

epistemological practices, allowing for a wealth of examples and counter-examples with which strengthen the validity of our definition.

Implicit in this broadening of empirical evidence is the treatment of art not as a product of specific behaviors, but as a more abstract term subsuming a wide variety of behaviors. As Dissanayake argues, this is analogous to the concept of “aggressive behavior,” which does not have a single manifestation but subsumes a whole array of different behaviors such as threatening, attacking, and defending. On this view, then, such activities as dancing, painting, and story-telling are all manifestations of a broader type of activity, known as ‘the behavior of art.’ Understanding art as a behavior also accounts for the fact that the degree to which this behavior is exhibited, and the forms it may take, vary considerably from individual to individual and from culture to culture. Just as certain members of a species may be more or less aggressive than others, and express such aggression as they do have in different ways, so, too, with artistic behavior. Correlatively, artistic behavior subsumes both the creation and the experience of art, which means that such behavior is not limited to a group of individuals known in the West as “artists.” Art is a universally human behavior for man *qua* man.<sup>53</sup>

This bio-evolutionary lens of inquiry offers us a wider perspective on the nature of the human organism than is available with other modes of aesthetic investigation. As was emphasized at the outset of this paper, we must come to terms with and define a specific “human nature” if we are to grapple with the questions of why art is a universally present part of human life and what benefit it confers upon us. The past several chapters have been attempting to establish the preconditions for answering these questions, laying out key aspects of the human

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 7-9.

essence--how man's mind functions, what it requires. We have attempted to establish that the essence of humanity is a specific kind of symbolic cognitive process called rationality, one that underlies and makes possible many of his other unique activities and products, including language, art, ritual, and play. The ethological perspective broadens our horizon of awareness, as we see that this symbolic processing is the product of years of evolutionary growth and selection. We can trace the evolution of man's symbol-making, discovering how, at each step in his evolution, only those most adept at symbolization and abstraction were able to procreate with greater likelihood. Dissanayake's perspective, derived from Darwinian evolutionary principles, also leads us to understand that if a behavior is universally manifested throughout all members of the species in question, it is part of the nature of that species.<sup>54</sup> Since art, properly understood, is universally present in all human lives, it can be argued to be *part* of human nature itself.

This observation leads to a key point of differentiation between a strictly ethnological or bio-evolutionary methodology and that which we are using here, which may be called, for lack of a better term, a philosophical methodology. An ethologist seeks to define human nature by looking at a vast troves of empirical data and noting similarities. She sees that if a behavior is universally present, it is, for that reason, part of the nature of the species. This means that art is part of human nature, but something like, say, cannibalism is not. The latter is an aberration, appearing in select societies for small amounts of time, conferring no survival advantage at all (indeed, quite the opposite). A philosopher, on the other hand, seeks to define human nature according to that which logically and metaphysically underlies all human behavior, statistically prevalent or no. We look to the degree to which an action or activity is uniquely human, i.e. the

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 19-20.

degree to which it differentiates us from all other animals. This has to do with both observing similarities and noting differences, as discussed in the outline of our epistemological methodology in Chapter 1.

A philosophical (as opposed to ethological) claim that art is part of human nature would rest on an argument linking man's essence, his symbolic rationality, and the creation of art. This is precisely what we are intending to do here. We are not observing the universality of art and, on these grounds alone, claiming it to be part and parcel of human nature, but using the universality as a springboard for further inquiry and questioning. We see the universality and attempt to explain it, utilizing the processes of integration and differentiation. We observe that art is universally present, but we will have to differentiate that activity from those of other animals in order to claim it to be part of *human* nature.

Ethology also seeks to explain the universality of a behavior, but in an importantly different way-- not in terms of epistemological essences, but in terms of evolutionary theory. For example, consider the fact that human infants universally fear strangers. They all recoil from those who are not immediately familiar to them. Ethologists observe this similarity between all humans and then seek to explain why this is the case *in terms of evolution*. This is the key to their understanding of human nature. They will construct arguments concerning the survival value of having a fear of strangers, the fact that if babies cry when individuals other than parents are holding them or approaching, this reduces the likelihood of death or injury. On these grounds, they would argue that this phenomenon is essential to human nature. Philosophers, on the other hand, will look at the universality of this behavior and then proceed not to explanation, but to differentiation.

The philosopher looks at the infant fear phenomenon and seeks to discover whether this is unique to human beings, and whether this is an essential property of human beings. If it is essential, *epistemologically* essential, then we would say it is essential to human nature. But this is not the case, for infants fearing those who are not their parents is not more fundamental to human nature than their symbolic rational mind. This is because the latter explains the former, i.e. it is the metaphysical foundation for the former's existence. Thus, the ethological standard for what is subsumed by the concept of human nature is bio-evolutionary. The philosophical standard is epistemological. The two are related, yet distinct.

This is confused by differing uses of the phrase 'human nature.' The philosopher would say that "Human nature is to act rationally." The ethologist would say that "It is in human nature to get carried away by extremely powerful emotions." The first use of the phrase refers to man's epistemological essence, his fundamental nature; the second uses the phrase to refer to a non-essential (but nevertheless profoundly important) element of human experience. Both have valid uses, in their appropriate contexts, but we must be sensitive to what that context is. This paper deals with the former of these two uses of the word, that is, the philosophical.

Ultimately we are seeking to use the ethological perspective and its various arguments and observations, but maintain a philosophical perspective on the subject at hand. Dissanayake's bio-evolutionary data and arguments shed an important light on the epistemological ideas with which we are engaging. Specifically, they are predicated on the premise that was emphasized at the outset: that man has a definite nature which must be understood in order to engage in any study of his behaviors or products. Attempting to understand art in terms of a necessary



connection to human nature, philosophically understood, is precisely what is helped by this approach.

### Survival Value

One critical component of the ethological approach that will illuminate an important element of our aesthetic definition is the question of the survival value of art. Dissanayake argues that art is not only universal, but *necessarily* universal, due to its contribution to human evolutionary fitness. A behavior or property is selectively advantageous if “the animal in question is thereby able to leave more offspring than another individual of the same species which does not have that feature.”<sup>55</sup> The fact that art is present in all human cultures across the span of history, the fact that its presence in society often predates the advent of language, and the fact that no human culture has ever been discovered which did not engage in artistic behavior, all support the conclusion that artistic behavior had survival value for early man. Just as a survival advantage was conferred upon those of our forebears who were able to restrain emotional desires using volition, thereby allowing for the growth and strengthening of prefrontal cortex, so it seems that those of our ancestors who engaged in the behavior of art had increased chances of reproduction, resulting in the species of human being we have today. The key questions, of course, are *what* the nature of that survival advantage is and *how* artistic behaviors could ensure it. The answers to these questions will point us toward the relation between art and man’s symbolizing mind, which will, in turn elucidate the nature of art as part of a larger genus including both ritual and play.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

Dissanayake offers several possible answers, among them being that art allowed for social cohesion, brought order to our lives, and provided a profound emotional experience of life's importance and value.<sup>56</sup> There are problems with each of these criterion, however, in that they could all have derived from non-artistic sources, such as, unsurprisingly, ritual and play. Given that these are also non-discursive modes of presentation, it is logical that they will bestow similar values upon human existence. To negotiate herself around this epistemological problem, Dissanayake argues that art ultimately derives from a universal human activity that she calls "making special," and that the survival value of the arts derives from that of this activity taken in tandem with many other activities associated with the arts, such as development of fine motor skills, critical reinterpretations of reality, and abstract reasoning.

"Making special" refers to the activity in which man separates the everyday somehow, making the ordinary extraordinary. It involves a conscious alteration of one's environment, creating a space in which the specialness of the object(s) can be experienced. In Dissanayake's words, making special

seeks to embellish reality (or experience) so that it appears otherwise additionally or alternatively real...Reality is converted from its usual unremarkable state--in which we take it or its components for granted--to a significant or specially experienced reality in which the components, by their emphasis or combination or juxtaposition, acquire a meta-reality.<sup>57</sup>

It is evident that the act of making special presupposes that the object or activity in question is valued, and, using Langer's insights into the inherently symbolic nature of sacra and phenomenology, it is clear that the object or activity is made special because of its symbolic importance, as well as, in some sense, its physical utility. The decoration of weapons, for

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 64-73.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

example, clearly does not have a utilitarian function: the spear will work just as well whether it is embellished with feathers and carvings or not. But the symbolic significance of the spear--the provider of food, the symbol of the hunt as well as the male phallus and all of the attendant connotations such symbolism had for early man--is derived in no small part from its utilitarian function. If it were not an effective weapon, it is unlikely that the shape of the spear alone would have suggested itself as grounds for making special. Thus, there are utilitarian as well as non-utilitarian elements bound up in the activity of making special.

Dissanayake argues that this activity has definite survival advantages for those who engage with it, since it derives from “the wish or need to persuade others (and oneself) of the efficacy or desirability of what was being done.”<sup>58</sup> Since making special involves expending a great deal of effort on something that has no direct relation to physical survival in the way that hunting or constructing shelter does, we may metaphorically say that the act has a high “price,” measured in energy and time used. This high price might well cost us our lives, if it isn’t payed for something of survival value. Indeed, that is why most if not all primitive art centers around aspects of early man’s life that *did* have a direct relation to his survival: cave paintings depicting the hunt, sculptures of fertility or nature spirits, or musical and dance performances accompanying birth or marriage rituals. Those of our forebears who paid the high price to make these activities special were more likely to treat them with the respect they deserved, resulting in a greater likelihood of survival. If, on the other hand, early man had paid this metaphorical price for making detrimental activities special--such as, say, a ritual that centered around the perceived value of starvation, cannibalism, or impotence--we would have died out long ago.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

While making special is not a sufficient condition for classifying something as an example of the behavior of art, it is a necessary condition. This means that “making special” subsumes a much broader array of concretes than does “art.” For example, it is not readily intuitive that a funeral or coming of age ritual is an example of art, but it clearly is a manifestation of making special. As we move slowly toward constructing a formal definition of art, we are now aware that it must make the nature of this difference clear. It must make clarify the ways in which art ‘makes special’ in ways that rituals and play activities do not.

### Ritual and Play

Having familiarized ourselves with the key components of the ethological approach, we can turn to Dissanayake’s observations concerning the nature of ritual and play. They are, in large part, similar to those of Langer, which should come as no surprise since both theorists ground their ideas in anthropological studies and extensive empirical research. Like Langer, Dissanayake argues that “metaphorical and symbolic uses of words and objects are the essence of ritual.”<sup>59</sup> Every word and gesture does not have a single meaning, but is saturated in a vast array of them. The sign of the cross, used in innumerable Christian rituals, has a complex overlay of meanings, symbolizing salvation, the Son of God, and that finality of acceptance encapsulated in the word ‘Amen.’ The crown bestowed upon the king during a coronation symbolizes not only the splendor and majesty of his kingdom, but the power of the state, the legal authority to rule, and the value of that individual’s position. Every symbolic object or gesture contains many nested layers of significance, and “such symbolic condensation can serve to unite in one graspable

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

whole a complex store of information about cultural and natural processes that would be too vast to remember separately and individually...[it] ensures economy of expression.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, we return to the ever-recurring *leitmotif* of unit economy--a ritual object or gesture condenses an enormous amount of data into a single perceptual unit, allowing man to apprehend and retain the full reality of such abstractions. It is becoming increasingly evident that man’s essence, his symbolizing mind, is the center of gravity round which art, language, ritual, and play weave their intricate and interrelated orbits.

Dissanayake argues that the symbolic power of ritual has an important social benefit, since it allows for cohesion and uniformity across all members of the group.<sup>61</sup> The individual becomes part of a larger whole, despite possible differences in knowledge, age, socioeconomic class, or gender. In the Christian mass, all parishioners are on equal footing, since all are there to receive communion, to reach absolution. In a graduation ceremony, all differences of knowledge and skill between each individual graduate are dissolved, and every student becomes part of a larger whole, the graduating class of that year. The communal aspect of ritual is extremely important, since it is by means of ritualized customs and behaviors that social norms, expectations, and mores are transmitted. In societies in which extended ethical or political treatises would be utterly inconceivable means for communicating important social information, ritualized behavior becomes an indispensable medium for such communication. Indeed, the fact that ritual predates discursive language by many generations evidences this conclusion; before man knew how to linguistically communicate his values and expectations, he was able to articulate them through ritual objects and gestures.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

Like ritual, play is a social activity, though it is also frequently found as a solitary activity. And, just like ritual, “the most salient and suggestive feature of play is its metaphorical nature.”<sup>62</sup> The stick a child holds in his hand stands for something else, a sword perhaps, or a wand; the stick becomes a symbol for that which is not present to the senses, but is generated by the intellect. A young girl’s miniature house and dolls symbolize real flesh and blood people, and she is able to act out her fantasies through them. Through make-believe, playing ‘house,’ the players are able to symbolically adopt roles outside of the sphere of their normal experience, but which are, nevertheless, crucially important. The imaginative projection into the symbolic objects allows for the exploration of such important phenomena as the role of adult authority figures, the responsibilities of the parent, the construction of a family unit, the ordering and structure of one’s place of habitation, etc. It is through the many-layered act of symbolization that play allows for the objectification of these critical values.

Thus, both ritual and play are grounded in metaphor, in symbolization, in abstraction. Man’s unique form of consciousness, his symbolizing mind, is the foundation on which these two fields of human activity rest--without the unit-economy inherent in the nature of symbolization, ritual and play would not be possible; but, without the need for unit-economy with respect to objectifying non-discursive experiences, neither ritual nor play would even be necessary in the first place.

### Formulating the Genus

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

The above observations concerning the nature of ritual and play also apply to the nature of art as well. It is readily perceived that art is a highly symbolic activity, making use of metaphor and a saturation of meanings. The oft-repeated phrase that ‘a painting contains a thousand words’ is grounded in the phenomenology of symbolization as we have discussed. Art is also a social behavior, often performed before an audience of peers. This is true of the performing arts just as it is true of the more object-oriented arts, such as literature or sculpture. In both cases, there is a culture of expectations, mores, and understandings surrounding the creative process, and the artist is often judged against those standards. Art also objectifies crucial components of the human condition, spanning the gamut of our experiences, from love to death, brotherhood to betrayal, triumph to defeat. All of the important experiences of human existence, all of the values and experiences that add up to an individual’s life, are found in and articulated through art. Just as with ritual and play, art is both necessitated and made possible by the nature of man’s symbolizing mind. All three forms of symbolization have the same source: the requirements of cognition and symbolization.

But the question remains: how is art different from ritual and play? Granted, there are many similarities, but there does seem to be an intuitive difference between attending a Catholic mass, playing with dolls, and listening to (or writing) a symphony. What are the facts that could substantiate this intuition? What might be the essence of art, that which renders it distinguishable from ritual and play? In epistemological terms, what is the differentia of art that keeps it distinct from other species in the genus?

To answer this, we must clarify what, exactly, makes art, ritual, and play all part of the same genus. We have already indicated that they are grounded in the nature and requirements of

man's symbolizing mind, but that is true of language as well. Yet there is a crucial distinction between linguistic symbolization and artistic, ritual, or playful symbolization. To begin with, the latter are all non-discursive modes of symbolization. They all deal with profoundly important values and experiences, ones which cannot be rendered in verbal form alone without something fundamental being left out. We have seen how both ritual and play concern themselves with the profound and the sacred, the fundamental elements of the human experience. It is obvious that art, too, deals with such important values. No art work is centered around that which is deemed unimportant, for even in the act of artistically rendering the mundane (such as in so-called 'found art'), the very process of aestheticization is supposed to render the previously banal object into something for contemplation, something important and special, something worthy of attention. In this sense, we can see the fundamentality of Dissanayake's observation concerning the practice of making special. It is indeed a cornerstone of any product or activity that we would call "art."

Thus, the genus of the definition of art consists of non-discursive modes of symbolization that articulate and objectify important human values, namely ritual and play. To use Rand's epistemological vocabulary, the Conceptual Common Denominator uniting art, ritual, and play is their common goal of rendering important human experiences in non-discursive form.<sup>63</sup> But implicit in this claim is a correlative one, namely that these symbolic modes are commensurable, all relatable to a single unit of measurement that will simultaneously provide the grounds for understanding their relation as parts of the genus while distinguishing one from the other as having differing ranges of measurements within the broad CCD stated above. What is this standard of measurement? Unlike in our early epistemological examples from Chapter 1, it will

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<sup>63</sup> Note, also, that uniting these three modes of symbolization simultaneously differentiates them from an other mode of symbolization, i.e. language. We can see that the process of integration and differentiation runs at many nested levels, into hierarchies of ever-increasing intricacy.



not be anything concrete, since we are not dealing with such low-level concepts as ‘length’ or ‘color.’ It will be an abstract quality, something itself linked by a wide chain of abstractions that eventually lead to such low-level concepts and, finally, ostensive reference. Clearly, constructing all of the links in this chain would consume volumes, and is far beyond the reach of this paper. We have, however, laid sufficient groundwork for articulating the unit of measurement for one of these links, the highest and most abstract of them: it is the *means* by which art, ritual, and play symbolize their content, i.e. the relation between the symbols and the existents (physical or mental) that are being symbolized. Art, ritual, and play are unified under the same genus because they all use a fundamentally similar means of symbolizing, namely non-discursive symbolism. They are each different from one another in accordance with the specific kinds of non-discursive symbolization they all use.

Ritual symbolizes by means of adornment and augmentation. Any given ritual centers around something preexisting, some objective existent that is deemed important, or symbolic of something else that is important. In a coronation, it is the individual who will be crowned king. In a funeral, it is the body of the deceased. In a marriage, it is the couple as a unit. The Thanksgiving ritual centers on the food, and the bounty and productivity it symbolizes. The birthday ritual centers on the person who has matured another year. In each of these examples, the focus of attention is some object, and the process of ritualization is the process of symbolic adornment. The king is crowned with a highly symbolic article of clothing, and given a scepter or a sword of equally symbolic nature. The body of the deceased may be mummified and surrounded with symbolic objects, or it may be ceremonially cremated and the ashes scattered or retained, or it may be buried, accompanied by symbolic gesture and chant. The married couple

are adorned with symbolic clothing such as veils or body-paint, and, and they are expected to perform symbolically important gestures in a place of ritual importance: a Christian couple kiss in a church, a Hindi couple makes ceremonial circuits of Holy Fire around the ritual site, an atheistic couple simply signs a document at a courthouse. There is enormous variety in each case, but that which remains constant is the fact that the objective existent is augmented by symbolically important objects and gestures that articulate the importance and value of the event in question.

Play symbolizes by means of projection and imagination. The focus of awareness for the player isn't necessarily a single set of existents, as it is for the ritualizer. In make-believe, the entire world may be re-imagined as a battle ground or a castle; instead of a single object or individual, the player reinterprets virtually everything in a new, symbolic way. Alternatively, there may be no objective existent at all--the focus of play may be entirely the result of the player's subjective experience, as, for instance, when children play with 'imaginary friends.' In either case, the everyday becomes special by means of projection and re-imagination, not necessarily physical alteration, as in the case of ritual. A stick, unaltered, will serve a child's purposes as a sword, just as a simple arcing gesture of the hand from table to mouth may serve to symbolize the act of eating. There is no need for adornment or alteration, only for imagination and projection.

Furthermore, more than ritual or art, play is fundamentally about the *activity* of symbolization, rather than the final product. In ritual and art, it is common for there to be an audience that contemplates the product, experiencing their values objectively through the contemplation, despite the fact that they were not involved in the creation of the product. We

witness marriages and graduations in which we have no part, just as we watch plays or operas in which we are not directly involved. With play, however, the case is different. Because the essence of play's symbolism lies in the act of projection, only those involved in the actual act of playing can experience that symbolic transformation. The focus of attention is not on producing an object, but on the act of symbolic reinterpretation. Thus, it is not nearly as common for people to gather in large crowds to watch play in action, such as a child's game of make-believe or even an adult game of chess. And when this does occur, as is sometimes the case for the championship matches for the latter, the object of interest is the skill involved in attaining the object of the game, noting strategies and marveling at virtuosity, rather than seeking to experience important values through non-discursive symbolization.

Artistic symbolization differs from both ritual adornment and playful projection. Deriving our position from Rand's aesthetic theory, we will argue that art symbolizes by means of selective recreation of reality. But in order to understand the exact way in which this is achieved, and to fully understand how this is different from ritual and play symbolization, a fuller exposition of Rand's theory of art is in order.

## Chapter 4: The Definition of Art

Rand's aesthetic theory is grounded in two key concepts whose full meaning and importance must be understood before her definition of art can be fully comprehended--they are the concepts of *metaphysical value-judgments* and *sense of life*. Each are correlative of the other, and we will consider the former first.

Metaphysical value-judgments are highly abstract propositions that refer to man's fundamental relation to reality. They are answers to such foundational questions as whether man has free will, whether he can achieve happiness, whether reality is stable and knowable, whether we are born evil, good, or neutral. The answers to these questions, Rand argues, are not simply of interest to a select few academics, but are of profound, *practical* importance to any human being. We cannot avoid answering these questions, even if only on a primitive and superficial level, since these answers are presupposed by, and implicit in, literally *all* of our actions and emotions. They form the very core of our mental and physical life.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the human mind is an essentially abstracting machine, condensing ever-wider pools of data into concrete symbols and thereby expanding our scope of awareness. This is true on all levels of man's functioning. Langer has demonstrated that it is foundational to the very act of perception as such, since all of our sense perceptions are transformed into symbols that gain their meaning within the context of all of the other objects we have perceived. Recall that we abstract certain perceptually essential properties from our physical environment, which then serve as schemas on which we are able to map similar experiences based on their resemblance to the abstracted original. Thus, our minds go from the particular to the general, and our first encounters with, for example, a group of particular roses

come to form a map of experience, a symbolized conceptual web according to which we measure our subsequent encounters with other roses.

Rand has shown how this kind of abstraction applies to the level of concept-formation as well. Just as we abstract *perceptually* essential data in the process of apprehending reality with our sensory organs, so we abstract *epistemologically* essential data when forming concepts. The process consists of condensing more and more data into a system of classifications and cross-classifications, moving from, say, the concepts of “chair,” “table,” and “stool” to the concept “furniture” to the concept “artifact.” At each tier of abstraction, the concepts correspond to a wider pool of concretes, making them that much more useful and that much more unwieldy if not properly defined.<sup>64</sup>

This process of abstraction continues all the way up the chain of concepts, starting from that which is given in immediate sensation and proceeding to the widest metaphysical abstractions that subsume all of existence. These metaphysical concepts are at the height of man’s cognitive chain, covering the largest number of existents. Because they are so abstract, they are implied in and are manifested through all of human action and emotion. For example, a student who studies conscientiously for her classes, prioritizes her time such that she masters the material at hand, restrains herself from wasting her time and energy on activities that would detract from her most important goals, and who maintains a constant state of awareness and focus during her activities is acting on a whole host of metaphysical presuppositions: that the universe is knowable through reason, and that with the proper amount of study she can attain the knowledge she seeks; that her goals are achievable, that happiness can be attained if she takes the

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<sup>64</sup> This is an instantiation of what other modern philosophers call “nested concepts.”

proper actions toward achieve it; that her emotions are not tools of cognition, to be taken as cues for immediate action without reflection; that her mind is competent to deal with reality and the challenges she faces; that she possesses free will and the responsibility for making her own decisions and motivating her own actions She may not be aware of such abstractions consciously, and, depending upon her schooling and explicit philosophical convictions, she may even deny these presuppositions outright. They are, nevertheless implicit in her every action, an inescapable foundation for her existence. They are the product of the mind's need to abstract to ever-wider ranges of awareness, eventually reaching the most fundamental relation between man and existence.

Even though human beings are capable of an extraordinary level of abstraction--holding complex discussions on the nature of justice and meta-ethics, or the structure of subatomic particles--he must perform a cognitive feat that is even more complicated still: "the other part [of his mental processes] consists of *applying* his knowledge--i.e., evaluating the facts of reality, choosing his goals, and guiding his actions accordingly."<sup>65</sup> In other words, simply forming concepts is not enough: man must know how to *use* those concepts to guide his actions, i.e. to live. Without ethical abstractions--answering the question "what should I do?"--man would be living on a sub-human level of awareness, conscious of actions only moment to moment, never able to see them within a larger framework.

Yet ethics is not irreducible, as we have seen in the example of the student given above. She was certainly acting on implicitly-held ethical propositions (it is good to value my education; it is good to work for my happiness; it is bad to prioritize short term goals over long-term goals,

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<sup>65</sup> Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 18.

etc.), but these in turn were informed by more fundamental abstractions. These abstractions serve as the great integrators of human knowledge, the framework in which all other concepts are formed. They inform ethical action in an indirect, yet profound way. These abstractions are what Rand calls “metaphysical value-judgments,” and they are “the link between metaphysics and ethics.”<sup>66</sup>

The relation between metaphysics and ethics may not be understood on a conscious level, but the human mind acts in accordance with its nature regardless of whether we are aware of that nature or not. The individual that believes reality is an unstable flux, that man is an insignificant part of the universe, that free will is an illusion, and that there is no possibility for happiness will have a different set of goals, ambitions, and expectations than the student in the example above, whose implicit metaphysics is essentially the inverse. As another example of this connection, Rand argues that is not coincidental that every dictatorship in history has been grounded in some sort of mystical metaphysics with anti-rational epistemological standards: whether it be the Medieval theologians’ religious mysticism that subverts faith to reason, or the more recent communist or Nazi neo-mysticism that speaks of polylogism and historical determinism, all forms of statist force and authoritarian dominance stem from a core of similar metaphysical propositions and premises.

Metaphysical value-judgments are inescapable axioms of human conduct, and are the necessary bedrock of any moral or political theory; one’s only choice in this matter is not *whether* to have a metaphysical system of thought, but *how* one’s metaphysical value-judgments are formed; through conscious reasoning, through cultural osmosis, or through some

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

combination of the two, each one of us has developed a core set of beliefs that inform our most basic attitude toward life. “Consciously or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, man knows that he needs a comprehensive view of existence to integrate his values, to choose his goals, to plan his future, to maintain the unity and coherence of his life--and that his metaphysical value-judgments are involved in every moment of his life, in his every choice, decision, and action.”<sup>67</sup>

According to Rand, one’s sense of life is the emotional corollary to one’s metaphysical value-judgments. A sense of life is defined as “a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence. It sets the nature of man’s emotional responses and the essence of his character.”<sup>68</sup> Rand’s use of the concept ‘character’ here is best understood not in the moral sense of the term, but in the more psychological sense, connoting a personality rather than a moral status. What one notes almost instantly about a person is his sense of life, which informs his every gesture and movement, his speech patterns and posture, his emotional “aura,” his attitude. For Rand, it is the most profoundly personal of our cognitive possessions, unique and unrepeatable. Each individual’s sense of life is his own, formed as a result of the particular experiences he had and his reactions to those experiences.

The sense of life, like all other aspects of man’s mental functioning, consists in abstracting from the particular to the universal. But, unlike conceptual abstraction of the sort that metaphysical value-judgments exemplify, a sense of life is formed according to a process of *emotional* abstraction. This “consists of classifying things according to the emotions they invoke--i.e., of tying together, by association or connotation, all those things which have the

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



power to make an individual experience the same (or similar) emotion.”<sup>69</sup> For example, let us return to our hypothetical student above. The metaphysical value-judgments she holds heavily influences her fundamental emotional attitude toward life and the types of concretes she associates with particular emotions. The particulars which she associates with excitement, interest, wonder are such things as libraries, museums, and natural parks and vistas (of the tamer variety). To her, each of these concretes connotes opportunities to exercise the efficacy of her mind and body in the pursuit of important and fulfilling knowledge. The emotional response, crudely sketched, is a product of her metaphysical value-judgments, what she consider to be fundamental about man’s relationship to existence. Crucially, however, these are not the only possible emotional responses. Someone else with similar reverence for the efficacy of the human mind and the powers of man’s imagination may find more fascination in machine shops and computer labs, which pique our student’s interest, but ultimately would not strike the same emotional chord within her. Though this is only a rough outline of the relation between metaphysics and emotional abstraction, the point is, hopefully, clear: emotional reactions are highly variegated and wondrously complex, though much of their fundamental tenor can be traced to core values as described by Rand’s conception of metaphysical value-judgments.

To be more precise, the core of these reactions derives from what one considers to be *important* in life. The concept of importance, for Rand, assumes a more metaphysical connotation than it does for most of us in our usage of the term. ‘Important’ refers to that which is worthy of attention or consideration. “What, in a fundamental sense, is entitled to one’s attention or consideration? Reality. ‘Important’--in its essential meaning, as distinguished from

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

its more limited and superficial uses--is a metaphysical term."<sup>70</sup> What one regards as important, in this fundamental sense, determines one's metaphysical value-judgments, and, therefore, one's sense of life.

There are those who believe it is important to please others, to accord to the expectations of those around them, to 'fit in' and conform; there are those who think it is important to think for themselves, to only act on what they believe to be the truth; there are those who think it is important to be proud of their virtues, while others value humility above anything else. Each of these value-judgments reflects the thinker's deepest sense of what is metaphysically important in life, i.e. they reflect his metaphysical value-judgments. These judgments in turn affect the nature of his ambition and actions as well as his emotional attitude toward life. With regard to this latter, Rand writes that "the integrated sum of man's basic values is his sense of life."<sup>71</sup> Thus, both metaphysical value-judgments and the sense of life ultimately stem from the deepest core of the subject's psyche, plumbing the depths of his values and his sense of his relation to existence as such.

Like all of our other concepts, our metaphysical value-judgements must be symbolized by some means; indeed, this need is all the more urgent given the fundamentality of these concepts. Their foundational role in grounding our values, in guiding our choices, in determining our world views and attitudes, requires that we be able to contemplate them objectively, that is, symbolically. We need to have the experience of apprehending these abstractions external to our minds in order for them to be fully real to us. Recalling our discussion in Chapter , just as a concept cannot be fully formed until it is rendered objective in the form of a word, so, too, with

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

our metaphysical value-judgments. To be precise, the form in which we hold our metaphysical value-judgments before they have been symbolically rendered in any way is our sense of life; we may have implicitly, sub-verbally reached certain conclusions about the nature of reality and man's place in it, but, absent any means of objectifying such conclusions, we can only experience them as a kind of diffuse, foundational emotional undercurrent.

Language is able to fulfill our cognitive need for symbolization to some degree, though it does so according to its discursive nature. We can objectify our core values in long, extended prose treatises, expositions in language of our deepest beliefs and premises. But, as Langer has pointed out, the discursiveness of language is a double-edged sword: it allows us the extraordinary boon of naming relations, but it also disallows precisely what non-discursive symbolization provides: a complex, rich integration of an enormous amount of *different* concepts into a single presentation. Therefore, although we can use language to discursively expound our deepest values, we still require something more immediate, a way to condense these values into a single unity that can be perceived as a whole, as opposed to a discursive string of information. Because metaphysical value judgments are so abstract, meaning that they subsume the widest possible number of concretes, a form of symbolism which can render them concrete in a *single* presentation would have unparalleled richness and conceptual power. It could bring our deepest, most profound views of life and existence into the same immediacy of awareness with which the word 'dog' brings our impressions, propositions, and understand of dogs to mind.

According to Rand's logic, it is for this reason that ritual, art, and play have developed: as non-discursive means of objectifying man's metaphysical value judgements, giving concrete form to his sense of life. Each of these modes of symbolization concerns itself with man's

deepest views of himself, as we discussed at the close of Chapter 3. This is what accounts for their similarity such that they are included in the same genus, while also being distinct from our other mode of symbolization, namely language. Art, ritual, and play each fulfill a specific need of man's symbolizing mind, the need to concretize his important, metaphysical abstractions. But, unlike language, these non-discursive modes of presentation can do so with an immediacy and force that is unavailable to language.

As we have already discussed, these different symbolic modes differ from each other according to their means of concretization. Ritual objectifies man's metaphysical value-judgments by means of symbolic adornment, and play does so through symbolic projection. Art accomplishes this feat by means of a selective re-creation of reality. Given formally, Rand's definition of art is "a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments."<sup>72</sup>

Rand's understanding of "selective re-creation" is similar in many ways to the Aristotelean notion of *mimesis*. In contrast with the Platonic understanding of the concept, it is not a literal copying of reality, in the manner of a mirror or a camera, but a conscious stylization of reality, selectively omitting certain aspects and emphasizing others. A painting, for example, will not produce the same image as a photo, since the artist will leave out certain details and exaggerate others in the process of "imitating" that which he is painting. Of course, an artist need not imitate only that which exists, since a large part of art's essence derives from projecting what is possible to imagine, not merely presenting what is already there. Even fantasy stories such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings* should be considered examples of selective recreations of

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

reality, since the characters make decisions and face challenges that are derived from real choices human beings have to make: to do what one considers right, or what one considers easy; to fight for one's values, or to capitulate to fear; to value friends in themselves, or means to other ends. Though some of the specifics of the plot and setting are beyond the pale of possible experience, these stories are still mimetic of reality.

What is the standard according to which the artist stylizes his creation? According to what he deems important, in Rand's metaphysical sense of the term. Underneath all of its lesser aspects and functions, art is fundamentally a sphere of human activity concerned with objectifying that which the artist deems important, fundamentally important, about man's existence. It is, in Rand's words, an "embodied abstraction," one that presents in a single unity the metaphysical value-judgments and sense of life of the artist.<sup>73</sup> The anthropological record provides ample evidence for Rand's argument, since, as we have discussed, virtually all primitive art focuses on those aspects of early man's life which he found to be fundamentally important. The power of nature, the value of the hunt, the hidden secrets of animal spirits--all of these were key components of early man's artistic endeavors.

Given that one's sense of life is a corollary of one's metaphysical value-judgments, it follows that the process of artistic creation is not guided solely (or perhaps even partially) by abstract reasoning and deductive thinking. It is not that an artist thinks to himself, "I value human volition, independence, and creativity. I want to embody these abstractions in concrete form. What elements of reality can I selectively re-create in order to objectify these values?" This is clearly a stilted, unrealistic thought process; the reason is that metaphysical value-

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

judgments are simply too abstract to be wielded in such purely conceptual terms. The process of distilling what one believes to be important in life is far too complex, subsuming far too many concretes, to be approached in this ‘top-down’ manner. Furthermore, as we have discussed, one may not even be able to consciously articulate one’s metaphysical value-judgments. How, then, is an artist able to embody his fundamental values, if he is not consciously reasoning through them and applying them during the process of creation?

It is by the guidance of his sense of life, the emotional corollary of his most abstract values, that the artist is able to stylize a universe and concretize his views of what is important in life. With the help of his sense of life, an artist is able to intuitively decide virtually every aspect of his creation, from the selection of the subject to the smallest detail of its stylization. This is true of anyone who creates an artwork, whether it be a primitive hominid painter, an ancient Greek sculptor, a nineteenth century playwright or a twentieth century composer. One’s sense of life is the means by which one translates one’s fundamental beliefs into a concrete reality through the process of artistic selective re-creation. Thus, we can see that art fulfills man’s need of abstraction and symbolization--just as concepts abstract what is epistemologically essential and our sense of life abstracts what is emotionally essential, art is created by a process, guided by the artist’s sense of life, of abstracting and selectively embodying that which is *metaphysically* essential.

This is the reason for art’s powerful emotional significance. The almost overwhelming emotional saturation that we experience as the result of both creating and experiencing a work of art stems from the fact that the object is a concretization of that which is most diffuse in one’s consciousness--one’s sense of life. It externalizes that which is involved in one’s every gesture

and goal, bringing it before one's consciousness as an object to be contemplated and experienced. This is not simply an existential luxury that humans occasionally indulge in. Just as there was a practical, cognitive *need* to symbolize one's metaphysical value judgments, so there is a correlating phenomenological *need* for the emotional experience art provides. The two are inextricable from one another; both imply the other.

[Art] gives [man] the experience of seeing the full, immediate, concrete reality of his distant goals...[he] needs a moment, an hour, or some period of time in which he can experience the sense of his completed task, the sense of living in a universe where his values have been successfully achieved. It is like a moment of rest, a moment to gain fuel to move farther. Art gives him that fuel; the pleasure of contemplating the objectified reality of one's own sense of life is the pleasure of feeling what it would be like to live in one's ideal world.<sup>74</sup>

Life is a process of attaining one's values, of achieving success after success; to the extent that this fails, one is failing to live, properly understood. But, for man, achieving goals is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Human beings must set their own goals, define their own standards, and generate their own motivation to continue to survive. On these grounds, art is indispensable to man's existential struggle. Among the daily vicissitudes of life, the reality of one's values becomes more and more diffuse, more and more difficult to recall to conscious awareness. Art reminds us of these values, of the importance of life as a value itself and what it means for us to be alive. It reminds man of what he is struggling for, and what is possible to him.

The inescapable need for this reminder and fuel may be felt by all of us each and every day. I challenge anyone to think of a single day during which they did not engage in the behavior of art, either as a creator or as experiencer: whether it was listening to music while driving to work or doing household chores, catching up on a novel before bed, catching a glimpse of one's

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

favorite painting as one dashes out of the house, unwinding with a movie or television drama at the end of a work day, or even humming to one's self while walking down the street: each of these testifies to the ever-present role art plays in our lives, how it is a constant motivator, and perpetual companion.

This is, in briefest essence, an exposition of our theory of art. Whatever intuitive appeal it may have, it is necessary to test the theory against the perennial problems of art theory and, more importantly, against the reality of concrete existents themselves in order to be convinced of its validity. To that end, we therefore turn our attention the insights and arguments of Denis Dutton, whose theoretical perspective and concrete analyses will aid us in refining our understanding of Rand's aesthetic theory.



## Chapter 5: Theory in Practice

Having at last formulated our definition, we are now able to test its accuracy. If the definition is a valid one, we should be able to use it to differentiate art from non-art in a variety of cases, and the results should make a fair degree of intuitive sense. Dutton's examples and theoretical principles will now be of great value to us, as he offers several examples of "difficult" cases from the philosophy of art that will sharpen the razor of our definition--or prove that the blade is perhaps too blunt.

Dutton's theoretical perspective is largely in line with the premises we have so far laid out. He is committed to the belief that any meaningful discussion of aesthetics must be grounded in a theory of a universal human nature, and he believes that Darwinist evolutionary theory provides precisely this type of theoretical framework. On the crucial question of what our universal human nature *is* however, Dutton is non-committal. This weak epistemological methodology seeps through the rest of his theory, as his answer to the question "what is art?" is grounded not upon an analysis of art that will yield a distinct epistemological essence, but rather on a set of, as he calls them, "lawlike generalizations." He formulates a list of twelve "cluster criteria" that will serve not as definitional standards, but as a "neutral basis for theoretical speculation."<sup>75</sup> While such a neutral basis is a desirable first step on any epistemological journey to defining the essence of a concept, it is certainly not enough.

As is true of many modern philosophers, Dutton does not seem comfortable with the idea of offering a firm answer on the question of essences, and so prefers a more diffuse approach to addressing art's nature. It seems that the fundamental reason for his and other's epistemological

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<sup>75</sup> Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 51.

reticence is the belief that, since all past theories which purported to define the essence of any concept have been shown to be invalid (overly narrow, too broad, etc.), *any* theory that seeks to define an essence must be predicated on some sort of antiquarian view of essences, one based on Platonic metaphysics. The logic is that if the essence is not something intrinsic to the object in question, existing independently of consciousness, then the only alternative is that it is subjectively constructed postulate. Giving a cursory look over the history of attempts to define ‘art’ Dutton argues that “aesthetic theories may claim universality, but they are normally conditioned by the aesthetic issues and debates of their own times.”<sup>76</sup> Implicit in this remark, and in his subsequent theorizing, is the premise that the idiosyncratic nature of theorizing is unavoidable, thereby rendering impossible a truly objective understanding the essence of a concept, especially one so abstract and emotionally-laden as art.<sup>77</sup> Chapter 1 has already indicated some of the reasons for the invalidity of this epistemological approach, chief among them that it rests on a broad misunderstanding of the nature and function of concepts.

These problems aside, Dutton’s “lawlike” cluster criteria serve an important purpose for our line of inquiry: they offer a set of intuitively plausible artistic qualities that our current definition should be able to explain or account for. We will use a few of the most universal of Dutton’s twelve criteria to give an initial test to our definition. The first, and perhaps most readily understood, is that of “direct pleasure.”<sup>78</sup> According to him, one can generally expect that

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> Dissanayake, too, holds this kind of view concerning any attempts to answer the question “what is art?” She argues that the Western concept of art as a “universal, suprasensible, intangible, transhistorical essence or power that informs some objects or activities” is clearly wrong-headed, and that, on these grounds, the concept of art may after all be something undefinable (40). Again, the logic is that absent a Platonic essence, a definition can only be grounded on some sort of subjective construct.

<sup>78</sup> Dutton, 52.

an art work will provide direct pleasure to the viewer as well as to the creator. This ties in with another of his criteria, “emotional saturation.”<sup>79</sup> Tying these two criteria together, we could argue that one of the most important features of apprehending a work of art is the experience of intense pleasure such that the act of creation or contemplation is felt as a self-justifying primary, and end in itself. But, as Dutton himself argues, this act is not *essential* to artistic experiences, since such pleasures as having a hot drink on a cold winter’s day or catching a view of a stunning natural vista are also experienced as self-justifying pleasures.

But, if our theory of art is correct, there should be some criterion by means of which we can distinguish what is traditionally called “aesthetic pleasure” from these other non-aesthetic pleasures. To make the matter fully concrete, our theory should be able to explain why there is a different kind of emotional involvement associated with the experience of watching a sunset across a sweeping valley from that which is associated with contemplating a painting of the very same phenomenon. The difference in the kind of emotion lies in the fact that the painting is a stylized recreation of the experience, and we experience pleasure from the emphasis the artist places on certain aspects of the sunset, while omitting certain others. He may draw our attention to the deepening colors the sunset gives to the surrounding landscape, saturating it with its warmth and light. Alternatively (or in tandem) the painting may emphasize the brilliance of the sun itself, as it may take up a greater proportion of the space than the surrounding landscape, or vice-versa. There may be animals or human beings included in the painting that weren’t there in the actual vista itself, and the distribution of light and color will almost certainly be different from the way it was experienced during the real sunset. All of these factors become matters of

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<sup>79</sup> Dutton, 56-57.

intense interest to the viewer and sources of pleasure, which are unavailable when one is merely observing reality as it is.

The selectivity itself becomes the source of enjoyment in contemplating the painting, since that which is included in it is *chosen* by the artist, thereby attaining a heightened degree of importance. The artist's metaphysical value-judgments are being rendered concrete through his or her selective choices, and in apprehending the painting, we experience the result of another human consciousness evaluating the subject at hand. Our aesthetic pleasure derives from both the mere *fact* that the subject has been so selectively rendered, and from the degree to which the stylization concretizes the way we also see the world. Thus, the painting of the sunset will contain a plethora of information that the sunset itself does not, becoming an object of intense spiritual importance precisely because it is an art work and not simply reality.

The emotional power of art is a derivative consequence from its primary essence, which is its ability to concretize one's sense of life. As Dutton has correctly observed, emotional power is not in itself an essential criterion for classification, and Rand's definition can explain and account for its presence, while still showing that it is a secondary, not primary, characteristic of art.

To further clarify certain aspects of our theory, let us turn to another of Dutton's criteria, this one being "representation."<sup>80</sup> This is closely related to our previous discussion of mimesis, since Dutton re-articulates the Aristotelean argument that humans naturally take pleasure in imitative acts. Yet, as he also argues, this is clearly not essential to artworks as such, since

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

children take joy in imitative play, constructing models, or even making maps. Thus imitation is an important part of many aspects of human life, not just art.

One might think we have hit an impasse for Rand's definition at this point. After all, we have stated that selective recreation is the differentia for artistic symbolization. Given that such activities as blueprint-making and newspaper writing are selective recreations as well, we seem to be in the rather unenviable position of having either to admit that journalistic articles and architectural plans are subsumed within the concept of 'art,' or else concede that the definition is too broad and based on a non-essential criterion.

Such an objection, however, rests on an important and prevalent epistemological error: that of equating a concept with its definition. Yes, selective recreation is the differentia that separates art from ritual and play, but it is not the *only* property which differentiates it from all other existents. Given that journalistic articles and blueprints are not within the genus, the precise properties that differentiate art from these other forms of imitation will not be the same as that which differentiates art from other modes of non-discursive symbolization. In this case, it is not the means of symbolization, but the *content* that is important to understand. Recall that Rand's full definition of art was that of "a selective re-creation of reality *according to an artist's metaphysical value judgments.*" This latter part of the formulation is the key to differentiating art from other forms of selective recreation, such as a newspaper article.

Art selectively stylizes reality with a particular teleological goal--in order to concretize an abstraction, a set of metaphysical value-judgments. The essence of an artwork, that which makes it what it *is*, is the fact that it adds up to a metaphysically important statement about man and life. Such is the very purpose, function, and nature of art. This is *not* the goal of a newspaper article

however, whose standard of selectivity is not what is *metaphysically* important, but what is *editorially* important. The journalist's goal is to convey information about a concrete reality, and he will therefore judge a detail to be non-essential if it distracts from the understanding of that particular event. Such concretes as hyper-specific time, location, and historical context are crucial for achieving a journalistic goal, but not necessarily for achieving an artistic one. Let me emphasize that this is not to say that art cannot deliver this kind of journalistic information; reading Balzac's *Peré Goriot*, for example, gives one a plethora of information about the nature of Parisian life in the early nineteenth century. Yet this is not the primary goal of the work, but rather a secondary consequence of its more fundamental function.

As Rand argues "a news story is a concrete from which one may or may not draw an abstraction, which one may or may not find relevant to one's own life; a fiction story is an abstraction that claims universality, i.e., application to every human life, including one's own."<sup>81</sup> The *nature* of these two forms of selective recreation are different because of the standard of selection (and, correlatively, the function) are different. Art fundamentally seeks to concretize metaphysical abstractions; articles fundamentally seek to convey information. The differences may be felt on a phenomenological or emotional level as well. "One may be impersonal and indifferent in regard to a news story, even though it is real; and one feels an intensely personal emotion about a fiction story, even though it is invented."<sup>82</sup> The differing emotional reactions are evidence of the differing nature of these two objects. Thus, properly understood, Rand's definition continues to hold force and can explain the differences between these types of mimetic products.

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<sup>81</sup> Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 37-38.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

As we have seen, Dutton's arguments have been quite helpful in the abstract, offering opportunities for clarification and more in-depth analysis and application. His concrete analyses will be equally useful as well, as he offers many anthropological cases of non-Western and primitive art that serve to clarify the various features of art and artistic experiences. For the sake of brevity, we will turn to just one of these examples and analyze it in some detail.

### Hindu *Jyonti* and the Question of Intention

*Jyonti* are paintings that depict scenes from Hindu mythology, and they are meant to be used in marriage ceremonies. There are many aspects of *Jyonti* which differentiate them from the products of the Western art tradition. They have a specific, religious function, namely to bring happiness and fulfillment to the wedded couple by means of offering spiritual guidance and protection. The aesthetic standards by which they are created and judged also differ radically from Western standards. There is not much emphasis placed on originality or individual style; rather the artist must concern herself with approximating fairly standardized ideals of what the images should look like. Furthermore, the *Jyonti* are decorative, not meant to be subjected to the kind of extended contemplation one might bring to Rembrandt's *Self Portrait*. For these reasons, many may be tempted to conclude that *Jyonti* are not examples of art as we have come to understand the term through our definition, but are rather some other form of human expression and design. Do the differing standards of creation and evaluation that are inherent in the process of creating *Jyonti* justify this conclusion? In other words, does the fact that these artifacts were created with specific religious functions in mind, according to specific standards of creation that

largely do not vary across individual cases, have any significance for the ontology of these artifacts? Do the differing intentions and standards of judgment cause them to be non-art?

According to the theory here set forth, differences in intention of this sort are superficial and do not affect the ontology of the work. The artist may not consider herself to be one, at least as we in the West have come to understand the term. She may view herself as a priestess to a religion, or perhaps simply a concerned mother who wishes to provide her son or daughter with a happy marriage. She may even consciously reject the label 'artist,' if she understood it as we do here. She may be creating a work for a ritual purpose, thinking of it as a purely functional, religious artifact, or perhaps even an embodiment of the Divine itself, as our early ancestors no doubt believed concerning their sculptures or dance-trances. These facts do not alter the fact that the *means* by which the product was created were the same as for any other artistic behavior, Western or not. The process underlying the creation of *Jyonti* does not fundamentally differ from the process underlying the creation of, say, the *Mona Lisa* or *War and Peace*. In all of these cases, regardless of conscious purpose, the creator is guided by his or her sense of life, and uses this as the standard of selection and creation. The artist's sense of life is the automatic guide for any act of aesthetic creation, and so the purposes to which the work is subjected after its creation are of no ontological significance. Because the process is guided by the artist's sense of life, the product is an embodiment of the creator's metaphysical value-judgments.

Indeed, religion is a kind of philosophy, one which offers a set of beliefs about the world, man's place in it, and what is important in life. The fact that an artifact condenses the views of a religious ideology into concrete form does not render it non-artistic; it simply requires us to categorize it as non-secular art. Rand comments on this phenomenon explicitly in her writings:



“Observe that in mankind’s history, art began as an adjunct (and, often, a monopoly) of religion. Religion was the primitive form of philosophy: it provided man with a comprehensive view of existence. Observe that the art of those primitive cultures was a concretization of their religions metaphysical and ethical abstractions.”<sup>83</sup> This evidences the close relationship between art and ritual, a fact with which we are already quite familiar.

To solidify the fact that the intentions of the artist are non-essential epistemological criteria, consider the fact we would not classify Beethoven’s *Mass in C-Minor* and Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* as different kinds of things from, say, Mozart’s piano concerti or Verdi’s operas. The former were created for specific religious functions, and the text for those functions largely determined the musical material that was used. There are many well-documented musical stylistic choices that were specifically reserved for religious music, and composers often used particular conventions for the expression of religious text. The latter, on the other hand, were created for decidedly secular audiences and purposes, specifically for monetary gain and an increase in reputation among the paying public. Even though the conscious purposes driving the creation of these works differed radically, and even resulted in differing content being included in the works, the fact remains that they were all nevertheless embodiments of the sense of life of their respective creators.

### Dadaist “Readymades”

We have now reached the perennial question of 20th century aesthetic discussions, the question of the ontology of such objects as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, i.e. the so-called “readymades.” In

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

attempting to answer this question himself, Dutton offers an insightful analysis of the history and motivation behind the creation of *Fountain*, noting that Duchamp himself did not consider the piece to be an art work. “Please note that I didn’t want to make a work of art out of it...[the term ‘readymade’] seemed perfect for these things that weren’t works of art, that weren’t sketches, and to which no art terms applied.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, we can say that Duchamp had no intentions whatsoever of his readymades being considered art, as evidenced by his use of the term ‘readymade’ rather than ‘sculpture’ or some other word which would carry the enormous weight of artistic connotations that he wished to avoid. Though one might be tempted to conclude that readymades are not art purely on these grounds alone, we have already established that the intentions of the artist are irrelevant to the evaluation of the ontology of the work. We must look to the nature of the object itself and, equally importantly, to the attendant *phenomenological effects* of contemplating the object in order to determine whether or not it is to be considered art.

Dutton argues that readymades of this type should be considered art, on the grounds that they fulfill many of the requirements on his list of cluster criteria, as well as the fact that there is “overwhelming agreement of generations of art theorists and art historians”<sup>85</sup> But such a judgment cannot be a valid one, since Dutton himself argued that the cluster criteria, even taken as a whole, do not offer a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for categorizing a work as art or non-art. His reliance on these non-essential criteria should therefore not be taken into consideration, nor should the fact that many have agreed that these works should be classified as art. The number of believers does not make a proposition any more true.

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<sup>84</sup> Dutton, 201.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Using the criteria laid out in the previous chapter, we can argue that Duchamp's *Fountain*, and by extension all such readymades, are not examples of art. By way of broaching this argument, consider the difference it would make to the ontology of the object, and consequently the experience of the object, if *Fountain* were a *painting* of a urinal instead of the actual urinal itself. The subject of the painting would be, of course, supremely unimportant to man, in Rand's metaphysical sense of the term. But the style and selectivity with which the subject was painted would be cause for aesthetic interest, because such stylization would imply evaluation, abstraction, and concretization of these evaluations. The painting of the urinal would evidence a worldview, a human consciousness expressing its sense of what is important; consequently, it would fulfill the cognitive need of art as we have come to understand it in this paper. On these grounds, such an object would clearly be an artwork, although its aesthetic merits would certainly be debatable.

But, the fact of the matter is that the readymade is not a stylization of reality, but simply reality itself, analogous to the way in which a view of a sunset is not the same thing as an aesthetic representation of the sunset in the form of a painting. What makes one a work of art and the other a beautiful, emotionally satisfying but eminently *non-artistic* experience comes down to the presence or absence of stylization. Recall that the purpose of art, its reason for existence, is that it serves a cognitive purpose, namely to provide man with an experience of his most fundamental values in concrete form. Art is an embodied abstraction, and it achieves this embodiment through selective recreation. Without selectivity or stylization, art does not exist, for it does not serve the purpose it is meant to serve. Because *Fountain* is not a selective stylization, because the very *point* of the work is that it is undistinguishable from innumerable other

appliances manufactured for a utilitarian, non-artistic function--in short because no values are concretized by the object--*Fountain* is clearly not a work of art.

This may be corroborated by consulting our experience and discussion of the object. The value and importance of *Fountain* can be readily understood without ever having seen it. All discussions of it center not on its physical appearance nor its aesthetic properties, but purely on what it *implies* as an art object, or whether or not it is even to be considered an artwork in the first place. Indeed, even a blind person could understand the purpose of *Fountain* assuming he was provided with the proper intellectual context and understanding of aesthetics and the nature of urinals. Rather than providing the “emotional fuel” that we have properly come to expect from artworks, *Fountain* provokes confusion, disgust, and heated debate between the artworld intelligentsia and those whose intuitions have guided them to the conclusion that it has taken the length of this paper up to this point to substantiate. Put simply, the primary function of *Fountain* and other readymades is to serve as objects of *discussion* rather than as objects of *perception*. Imagine saying the same thing of true works of art, such as *The Mona Lisa* or *King Lear*. If such a proposition strikes us as utterly preposterous, it is because the value of artworks--real artworks, as opposed to debris or home appliances that are meant to be “viewed as artworks”--lies in their physical nature, that which is apprehended by man’s sense organs and symbolized by his mind.

Recall that the function of art is to symbolize man’s metaphysical value judgements; as we discussed in Chapter 2, it is inherent in the nature of a symbol that it be external to the mind of the subject, that it take some objective form. This is especially true of a work of art, since its physical form is the very embodiment of abstract metaphysical value-judgments. It is through contemplating a physical object that man is able to experience his most important values

concretely. The fact that *Fountain* need not ever been *seen*, let alone contemplated, in order for its “message” to be delivered is evidence of its non-artistic ontology.

Duchamp wanted the power of readymades to be purely abstract or ideational rather than physical. His motivation was grounded in the belief “that it might be possible for art to be a form of expression purely for the mind, rather than the eye. His first experiment in this direction, toward pure ideas and away from ‘retinal art,’ as he termed it was *Bicycle Wheel*.”<sup>86</sup> This attempt rests on a flawed understanding of the nature of the human organism, as we have come to understand it in the first two chapters of this paper. It rests on a mistaken bifurcation of mind and body, a belief that ideas can somehow be formed without sensory input. But, As Langer has powerfully demonstrated, the mind and body form an integrated unit. We cannot create anything “purely for the mind” that does not take some sort of sensory-symbolic form, for there is no other way in which the mind can function. If the mind is an essentially symbolizing organ, and inherent in the nature of a symbol is the fact that it is external to the subjective mind, it follows that the only way to communicate any content to the mind at all is through symbolic means. Thus, the notion that we can have a kind of human expression and communication that is purely ideational is a contradiction in terms. Only through symbolization or signification is expression possible to human beings, and the attempt to deny this fact by creating so-called “artworks” whose physical, perceptible, aesthetic properties are incidental and and irrelevant to its function is an attempt to contradict the nature of reality and the human organism.

Duchamp’s effort is grounded on a misunderstanding of art’s nature and function, an assumption that it is purely a matter of perspective or subjective will that makes something a

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

work of art. Such a proposition is exactly the reverse of the truth. Man has a definite nature, which means his mind, too, has a definite nature; he must symbolize his thoughts in order to act on them and perpetuate his existence, and this includes symbolizing his widest abstractions. Art performs this latter task for him, fulfilling a crucial survival need. Replacing art with urinals does not alter the fact that man still requires art if he is to live a life proper to a human being. The existential consequences of this attempt to deny man's nature, this attempt to render A non-A, are numerous and all around us, evidenced by what is commonly called, with some variations, the 'spiritual vacuum of our age.'

As further evidence of the fact that readymades are not art, consider the fact that any ability they have to command attention to themselves is derived from the metaphysical power of true art. Readymades depend on the reputation of the cultural institutions in which they are housed to achieve their effect. Seeing a readymade on the street would have no spiritual or aesthetic significance. Without the power of the museum or gallery, the readymade would remain unremarkable. But how did the museum or gallery come to have this power, which it so blithely confers onto the readymade? It is because the objects that it houses are supposed to be spiritually or metaphysically significant. Readymades deliberately seek to deny this expectation while simultaneously counting on it for their effectiveness.

It is evident, then, that readymades, "found-art," and other similar avant-garde trends which enshrine the mundane are not deserving of the title art. We have shown this to be the case both deductively, by reference to the logic of our definition and how it would apply to this particular case, and inductively, by consulting the actual experiences that we human beings have had with respect to readymades and their like. Either way we approach the issue, the conclusion

is the same, which further strengthens the validity of our definition. It speaks to the virtues of a theory when its deductive reasoning is able to accord with intuitions about the subject independent of that reasoning as well.

## Conclusion: Problems and New Horizons

Rand's definition of art seems to be a valid one, when it is seen in the context we have here established. There are, however, several crucial questions that, as of yet, have been left unanswered. If we are to truly offer our assent to this definition, these problems must be addressed.

We have argued that the power of art lies in its unique mode of non-discursive symbolism. Language, we have said, cannot objectively render metaphysical value-judgments in the same way artworks such as paintings or plays can. There is, however, a rather large elephant sitting in the room: what about literature? It is clearly a discursive art form, making use of words strung out one after the other. And, unlike in poetry, the rules of grammar must be adhered to if the meaning is to be conveyed. A novel or short story in which the sentences run together without break or separation, in which verbs and nouns enter and leave sentences without regard for grammatical principles, would be impossible to comprehend, let alone provide that unique form of emotional fuel that art is meant to give. Are we to say, then, that literature, because it is discursive, is consequently not art?

While to fully and adequately address this question requires careful research and argumentation, we can offer a clue as to the direction of the answer. Concluding that literature is not art rests on a single mistaken premise: that the totality of the literary content may be conveyed purely by its discursive content. Literary works are indeed discursive, but their content consists of something greater than the sum of its parts. The sentences each add up to a sum, a total that cannot be reduced to any one sentence or group of sentences, and that sum total is itself non-discursive. It is something that we were lead to via language, but that simultaneously



supersedes it, just as the content of a painting or drama also supersedes precise linguistic encapsulation. This content is the sum totality of the artist's metaphysical value judgments, the concretization of his sense of life. Clearly there is much more to say on the topic of literary ontology, but I hope this indication is enough at least to throw some doubt upon the objection offered above.

If the ontology of a literary work is difficult to encapsulate, that of a musical work is even more so. Rand's definition emphasizes the mimetic nature of any art work, and if we are to consider music as subsumed by the concept "art," we should be able to articulate how music constitutes a selective recreation of reality. Its content is so abstract that it seems impossible to say that it imitates anything external to itself. Indeed, what do we even mean when we speak of so-called "musical meaning?" According to the theory of meaning here set forth, there would have to be some pattern of relations between subject (listener), term (music), and object. The question is, what is this object, this third term, and how is music related to it?

Answering these questions properly would consume volumes, but there are several promising leads. Langer's theory of symbolism has been expanded and developed in order to account for the nature of music meaning in the terms articulated above. Her treatise on the subject, *Feeling and Form*, is an attempt to answer precisely these kinds of questions.<sup>87</sup> There are also several fascinating attempts to define the relation between musical and linguistic syntax, which illuminate the nature of meaning in these two forms of symbolization even further.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

<sup>88</sup> See, the work of Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, particularly *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983).

Contextualizing these theoretical approaches within the argument given here would give us a clearer picture of musical mimesis.

Possible problems with literary and musical ontology aside, our theory of art offers many new vistas for us to explore in the field of aesthetics. For one, the question of aesthetic merit may be seen in a new light. If we are correct in arguing that art is not the province of subjective whim but is rather an objective necessity for man's survival as a rational being, it follows that there must be some objective criteria according to which we can measure whether any given work of art is good or bad. This claim is extremely counterintuitive in our age of radical tolerance, wherein articulating value judgements of something as profoundly important as art is thought to evidence bad manners, intellectual backwardness, or a close-minded worldview; however, counterintuitive claims have never hindered the advancement of philosophical inquiry before, and I see no reason for it to begin to do so now. It seems logical that the standard according to which one measures the objective value of an art work is in accordance with the degree to which it fulfills the function it is meant to serve, i.e. that of embodying metaphysical value-judgments. The degree to which such value-judgments are clear to the viewer/listener/reader is the degree to which we may consider an art work to have successfully achieved its purpose. But, *how*, precisely, can we measure this clarity? What is the exact standard of measurement? These remain questions for further, careful consideration and refinement.

There is, in addition, one vast, almost untapped reservoir of aesthetically relevant questions to be found in the recent integration of technology with traditional artistic media. For example, how might our theory contend with that most puzzling cross-pollination of leisure activity, artistic creation, and consumerism we know today as video games? There are undeniable

aesthetic qualities to each of these games, as the ever-improving technology for graphic rendering illustrates. Yet is beautiful concept art and perhaps a compelling story-line enough to be considered art? Are video games selective recreations of reality, and if so, how? How are the game-maker's metaphysical value judgments presented? What role does the agency of the player have in these questions of ontology? And should it matter that the game is a product not of a single artist, but a whole company of them? Some of these questions have been grappled with before, though not within the context of the composite theory argued for here.<sup>89</sup> Any adequate theory of art should be able to account for this increasingly prevalent part of the modern mind's activities.

Though there is an enormous array of unanswered questions left before us, this does not reflect poorly on our attempted goal in this paper, namely to define the essence of art's nature and importance in human life. Having expounded a theory of mind that centers on man's powers of symbolization and abstraction, we have discovered that there is a profound cognitive need that we humans have, which only art can fulfill. On these grounds then, and these grounds alone, are we to judge whether something is or is not a work of art, and the theory has seemed to serve us well in the few examples with which we have here contended. The unexplored vistas of further inquiry remain on the horizon, however, and with this foundational grounding we can hope to bring ourselves to bear on these other pressing questions, giving them a fresh perspective and consideration that they perhaps have not had before.

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<sup>89</sup> See Dominic McIver Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

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