

The Pragmatic Constraint and Revisionary Ontologies of Art

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At the heart of Anders Pettersson's 2017 book, *The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning*, is his proposed "cluster" definition of a textual work. On this view, a text is a cluster of three kinds of objects: all the physical exemplars of the work, the work's meaning, and the complex signs that convey that meaning.¹ Pettersson contrasts this with the "ordinary conception" of a text, wherein a text is a unitary object made of the signs and meaning, and each exemplar is an instance of the supervening textual work. The cluster definition is preferable because it is able to overcome contradictions plaguing the ordinary conception and its competitors. This cluster conception of a textual work is both original and deserving of more critical attention. Pettersson not only motivates the view well through his consideration of key examples, but deftly handles the obvious objections. Although the cluster conception is revisionary of our ordinary conception, he makes a strong case. However, I do not focus here on the heart of Pettersson's work but on something akin to its spleen; Pettersson's criticism of David Davies' "Pragmatic Constraint" (PC) on the ontology of artworks.

The PC requires that ontologies of art must take the entities at the centre of artistic practice to be that for which we seek an ontology, hence ontology of art is accountable to practice. Artistic practice here refers to such things as how properties are ascribed to art in critical and appreciative practice, how artworks are individuated, and the modal properties ascribed to artworks in practice.

Consider Davies' original presentation of the PC in *Art as Performance*. Davies begins his discussion by considering Monroe Beardsley's ontology of dance. Beardsley describes a dance as comprised of bodily motions that in virtue of satisfying "generating conditions" are "movings" or "posings."² The generating conditions require that the motions have certain expressive qualities associated with the volition of the performer. However, Davies reports that Noël Carroll and Sally Banes object to this view on the grounds that it cannot accommodate contemporary dance works like Yvonne Rainer's *Room Service*.³ In any medium a "common-sense view" of what constitutes an artwork can be devised, like Beardsley's theory of dance, and modernist works can be identified which challenge this view. For Davies, this illustrates the constraint that artistic practice puts on ontological theorizing about what counts as an artwork. The object of inquiry must be the subject of our artistic practice, including creative, critical, appreciative, and individuating practices, upheld on reflection. Theories like Beardsley's fail for arbitrarily excluding works identified in practices.

Pettersson criticizes the PC for being inhospitable to revisionary ontologies. According to Pettersson, "Analytic aestheticians do not like to... perform what is called 'revisionary' analyses."⁴ A

¹ Anders Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), 13.

² Monroe Beardsley, "What is Going on in a Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* 15, no. 1 (1982): 32.

³ David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 17.

⁴ Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

revisionary ontology of art is one which contradicts our basic *ontological* intuitions about what constitutes an artwork in a given medium, and for that reason seems *prima facie* implausible. On the basis of this assertion, Pettersson states that: “David Davies has even elevated such acceptance of the basic structures of the existing mode of thinking into a methodological principle, calling it a ‘pragmatic constraint’ on analytic-aesthetic analyses.”⁵ The PC is thought to preclude revisionary ontologies of art by requiring respect for practice, but this criticism is odd. A common complaint against Davies’ ontological proposal in *Art as Performance*, that artworks are the extended action an artist engages in, is that it is too revisionary. Andrew Kania asks: “How is it with this explicit emphasis on ordinary artistic practice, Davies ends up arguing for a view that is, on the face of it, quite unintuitive?”⁶ Given that Davies’ ontological proposal is often attacked for being implausibly revisionary, accusing his methodological principle of prohibiting revisionary ontologies is strange.

The oddity of Pettersson’s accusation is explained by his misunderstanding of the scope of the practices captured by the PC. He claims that: “analytic aestheticians pay little attention to actual contemporary critical practice... because that practice is heavily influenced by poststructuralism.”⁷ Thus, he concludes that the critical and appreciative practices referred to by the PC are, “in substance, ‘mainstream analytic-aesthetic thinking about these matters.’”⁸ Remember that Davies motivated the PC through consideration of *Room Service*, a work of modern art which challenged Beardsley’s common-sense view of what constitutes a work of dance. Davies states explicitly in *Art as Performance* that the PC considers “artistic practice broadly conceived.”⁹ He later reiterated in response to his critics that the PC demands “extensive review of the kinds of judgments that enter into our critical and appreciative engagement with works across the full spectrum of the arts.”¹⁰ The claim that the PC excludes contemporary artistic practice is thus unjustified.

However, it is noteworthy that Pettersson’s criticism does apply to the version of the PC defended by Robert Stecker.¹¹ Although Davies recognizes contemporary critical practice as part of the artistic practices captured by the PC, Stecker argues it should be ignored by the constraint. Considering Stecker’s argument in light of Pettersson reveals the folly of ignoring actual critical practice: much of what is considered art in practice would be rejected out of hand.

A second criticism of the PC launched by Pettersson is that the “talk of properties ‘rightly’ ascribed to works seems to me to be question-begging.”¹² Though difficult to parse for its brevity, the implication seems to be that we cannot assume artworks have the properties they are treated as having in practice. Pettersson explains through a disanalogy: “the exercise of politeness within a given community can be viewed as a practice, but will have nothing to do with truth or falsity: the rules of

⁵ Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

⁶ Andrew Kania, “The Methodology of Musical Ontology: Descriptivism and its Implications,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 4 (2008): 430.

⁷ Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

⁸ Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

⁹ Davies, *Art as Performance*, 21.

¹⁰ David Davies, “The Primacy of Practice in the Ontology of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 2 (2009): 163.

¹¹ Robert Stecker, “Methodological Questions about the Ontology of Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 4 (2009): 376.

¹² Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

politeness are just what the community takes them to be.”¹³ This is different from artworks, which do not have their properties determined by common acceptance of a practice. In developing this disanalogy, Pettersson fails to acknowledge that the PC does not take the ontology of artworks to be *determined* by artistic practice, but instead makes the epistemic claim that artistic practice is the appropriate *evidence* to consult when doing ontology of art. In fact, this approach is analogous to the study of politeness. Pettersson is correct that politeness is determined by our practice, unlike artworks, but in noting this difference he overlooks the necessary epistemic role practice plays in developing an ontology of art. The distinction between determining and being indicative of ontology is crucial, and Pettersson is not alone in failing to draw the distinction. Julian Dodd’s forceful critique of the PC as “local descriptivism” also does not draw this distinction.¹⁴

I have focused on this minor misstep in Pettersson’s book because it is missed opportunity. The PC has the potential to help Pettersson advance his somewhat revisionary ontology of textual artworks when properly understood. Much of the rationale Pettersson provides throughout his book as to why we should abandon the “ordinary conception” and adopt his cluster view hinges on how the ordinary conception fails to explain certain features of artistic practices related to texts that the cluster view accommodates. Pettersson’s own methodology is thus closer to an application of the PC than he realizes, and explicit recognition and use of the constraint could help him advance his ontology. Regardless, Pettersson’s book is highly recommended for its compelling and provocative ontology of textual works, which will be of interest to metaphysicians and literary theorists alike.

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¹³ Pettersson, *The Idea of a Text*, 170.

¹⁴ Julian Dodd, “Adventures in the Metaontology of Art: Local Descriptivism, Artefacts, and Dreamcatchers,” *Philosophical Studies* 165, no. 3 (2013): 1047.

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