P.F. Strawson and Stephen Davies on the Ontology of Art

A Critical Discussion

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Abstract: P.F. Strawson's *Individuals* (1959) contains a condensed version of an ontology of art. According to this ontology, musical and literary compositions are similar to types. They are abstract entities, instantiated in the performances of the piece of music or the copies of the literary work. Musical and literary compositions are "well-entrenched", Strawson says – we cannot eliminate these abstractions, or perhaps we have no need to do so. Strawson's ontology of art forms an integral part of what he calls his "descriptive metaphysics", and his resistance to the elimination of types and type-like entities is one example of his reservations against "revisionary metaphysics".

Nowadays, Strawson's name is seldom mentioned in connection with the philosophy of art. Yet the general view of the ontology of art advocated in *Individuals* is still probably the one most widely held in analytical aesthetics today. Thus, for example, Stephen Davies adopts the same general position as Strawson in his article "Ontology of Art" (2003), the best informed contemporary overview of the complex of problems surrounding the mode of existence of works of art. Unlike Strawson, Davies also adduces explicit reasons why concepts of musical and literary compositions cannot be successfully eliminated.

Critically reviewing Strawson's and Davies' standpoints and arguments, I maintain that concepts of artworks can in fact be successfully eliminated, and that the bracketing of such notions leads to a better theoretical perspective on musical and literary communication. Throughout the paper, I speak for an open-minded approach to conceptual revision.

Keywords: ontology of art, conceptual revision, elimination of the concept of a work of art, literary and musical communication.

Introduction

In his *Individuals* (1959), P.F. Strawson offers, among many other things, an extremely concise ontology of art. For Strawson, musical and literary works are abstract entities, and they are "well-entrenched", that is, they are not the kind of abstraction that we can manage without. On both points, Strawson's ontology of art is very much in tune with dominant views in analytical aesthetics today, for example with the position adopted in Stephen Davies' article "Ontology of Art" (2003), which is probably the best informed contemporary overview of the complex of problems surrounding the mode of existence of works of art.

In my paper, I discuss Strawson's and Davies' views of the ontology of art and devote considerable attention to Davies' arguments for the non-eliminability of concepts of works of art. My review of Strawson's and Davies' standpoints and arguments will be mainly critical. I will defend an alternative position: the idea that concepts of musical and literary compositions can in fact be eliminated, and that it is often important to be able to do this. This thought is not new; it has been advocated by a minority of thinkers ever since Richard Rudner first introduced it in a paper from 1950, "The Ontological Status of the Esthetic Object".[1] I will, however, provide fresh arguments for the idea, and also, to some extent, reshape it.

Strawson's ontology of art forms an integral part of what he calls his "descriptive metaphysics", a kind of metaphysical reasoning that is opposed to far-reaching conceptual revision. I will question the importance ascribed to descriptive metaphysics and speak for an open-minded approach to the rethinking of traditional conceptual schemes.

Strawson's Descriptive Metaphysics

Strawson's *Individuals* carries the subtitle *An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, and it begins with a distinction between two kinds of metaphysics that Strawson names "descriptive" and "revisionary" metaphysics. According to his definitions, descriptive metaphysics "is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world", while revisionary metaphysics "is concerned to produce a better structure". Straw-

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[1] Two contributions in the same vein, partly inspired by Rudner's article, are Bachrach (1971) and Pettersson (1984).

son does not regard these two kinds of metaphysics as being on a par; indeed, he thinks of revisionary metaphysics as being "at the service of descriptive metaphysics" (1959, 9).

It is surprising to be told that revisionary metaphysics is at the service of descriptive metaphysics. Strawson portrays descriptive metaphysics as aiming to describe how we ordinarily perceive the world, that is, to reflect and analyze the way of thinking about the world that underlies ordinary language. Descriptive metaphysics starts from "a close examination of the actual use of words" but goes further and deeper (1959, 9). Revisionary metaphysics, on the other hand, seeks to achieve a better understanding of the world than the one we have now; in reason, it must aim for the best possible understanding of the world. This makes revisionary metaphysics sound like metaphysics tout court, the theory of what truly exists. But how could the quest for the best possible understanding of the constitution of the world be subordinated to the conception of the world that is commonly held and implicit in our ways of speaking? How could metaphysics be at the service of descriptive metaphysics?

The explanation seems to be that Strawson does not believe that the structure of our thinking about the world can be substantially improved. Again and again, throughout *Individuals*, he considers possible revisions of our ordinary perspective, but these are always rejected, often rather summarily. For example, the idea of four-dimensional objects, that is, of objects extended in time, is simply brushed aside by Strawson with the remark that "the category of process-things is one we neither have nor need" (1959, 57).[2] It is true that things in this category do not form part of our ordinary outlook on the world, but Strawson does not ask himself whether the concept of a process-thing might nevertheless be of help in the understanding and accounting for certain phenomena. By avoiding this question Strawson also avoids the idea that the concept of a process-thing may actually be needed. He just declares it useless without further deliberation.

Strawson does not deny that there might, in principle, be better alternatives to our current mode of thinking. In practice, however, he is unwilling to open any space at all for such competing options, which means that what Strawson calls "our conceptual scheme" (1959, 59) is

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[2]   Some other characteristic rebuttals of revisionary attempts can be found on pp. 109, 131 – 33, and 216 – 24.

made to appear more or less inevitable. In his view, there is "a massive central core of human thinking which has no history". This core consists of conceptions that are "commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings" (1959, 10). By speaking of the conceptions as "indispensable", Strawson makes it clear that he cannot conceive of a situation where we should be prepared to give them up.

At the end of *Individuals*, Strawson sums up the results of his descriptive inquiry into our scheme of thinking. He concludes that "if metaphysics is the finding of reasons, good, bad or indifferent, for what we believe on instinct, then this has been metaphysics" (1959, 247). Evidently, Strawson implies that metaphysics is indeed the finding of reasons for what we believe on instinct, that is, that descriptive metaphysics is in fact metaphysics pure and simple. Revisionary metaphysics is defined out of the picture.

This is an unorthodox definition of metaphysics. Standard sources inform us that the word "refers generally to the field of philosophy dealing with questions about the kinds of things there are and their modes of being", and that "metaphysicians have constantly aspired to say what there is in the world or to determine the real nature of things",[3] et cetera. Thus metaphysics is traditionally considered to be concerned with the true nature of the world, not what picture of the world is encapsulated in ordinary language.[4]

Implicitly, however, Strawson describes what he calls "our conceptual scheme" as if it were hardwired into human beings. He presents this scheme as forming the indispensable core of our conceptual equipment, representing something we believe in instinctually, and as having no history. In essence, these are all empirical contentions, but Strawson

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[3] First citation from Hancock (1967, 289); second citation from Walsh (1967, 301).

[4] In his book *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 34, Strawson takes account of the objection that the question of what there is (as opposed to what we usually suppose there is) must be the principal concern. In a rather evasive reply, he presents our conceptual scheme as the first priority for our research: "Given all the warnings we have noticed about how philosophical paradox and confusion may arise from failure to take account of how our concepts actually function in use, it would surely be reasonable to get a clear grasp of how they do function before trying to evaluate the reasons that some philosophers might have given for challenging our general accepted working ontology."

does not present any empirical evidence in their favour. He relies on authoritative gestures rather than reasons when he portrays descriptive metaphysics as the only viable option and revisionary metaphysics as something which may, at best, provide us with a clearer perception of the features of "our conceptual scheme", produced by its confrontation with the strange and unnatural.

An Alternative View of Metaphysics

It is not really my ambition to discuss the strong and weak points of ordinary language philosophy. However, it is important for my theme to emphasize that there are alternatives to Strawson's reliance on what he calls "our conceptual scheme". I must even say something about my own metaphysical convictions so that I can later explain how I think about the ontology of art.

By and large, I subscribe to John Searle's ideas about what there is; therefore, let me offer a brief sketch of some of Searle's standpoints. Searle draws a distinction between language-independent and language-dependent realities (1995, 160 – 161). Language-independent phenomena are those that require no linguistic elements for their existence, such things as water and rocks and stars, or, for that matter, cars or waistcoats or buildings. If humankind were wiped out, and with us all language, the language-independent objects would still be there – although there would, of course, be nobody around to speak of them as "water", "rocks", et cetera.

Language-dependent phenomena are a different matter. They come into being through the creation of mutual expectations, of communal human conventions, and are unthinkable without language. Institutions, like the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, are good examples, as are linguistic and conceptual phenomena. If humankind were wiped out, and with us all language, there would no longer be an Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, nor an English word "red", or the concept of a person. That is because the Academy and the word and the concept do not form part of language-independent reality. They exist through human agreement, as social constructions that belong to a social reality in which, for example, certain sequences of material sounds are counted as instances of the English word "red".[5]

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[5]   Cf. Searle's distinction between brute reality and socially constructed reality (1995, 190 – 191).

Searle is a realist in the sense that he believes in the language-independent existence of the outer world, but when it comes to the description of the outer world, he emphasizes the relativity of all we can say. To give an example – and now I depart from Searle – think of maps. One can construct, say, a large number of maps of France that are all different and all correct, since one may use different cartographic projections, different scales, different principles for the selection of charted objects, different cartographic signs, et cetera. In an analogous manner, one can give many different true descriptions of the world. In this connection, Searle speaks of "conceptual relativity". "Systems of representation," he says, "such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary" (1995, 151).

Obviously, Searle's take on metaphysics differs from that of Strawson in *Individuals*. It is conspicuous, for instance, how Searle keeps the world at a distance from language and thinking. In Searle's scheme, there is an outer world that is independent of our thoughts and utterances in relation to it. How it is to be described is not a question of how ordinary language portrays it.

When viewed in a Searlean light, "our conceptual scheme" is a human creation and to that extent arbitrary. Its usefulness will be an open question: will we be able to achieve the understanding or the practical results we are after with its help, or will we have to devise alternative conceptualizations? Perhaps we should make use of different conceptual schemes for different purposes, much as we design maps of France differently depending on the purposes that they are intended to serve.

Strawson's Ontology of Art

Let us now proceed to the ontology of art. The paramount question in the ontology of art, and the only one which I shall bring up here, concerns what is sometimes called the ontological status of the work of art.[6] Think for instance of Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1816). The question of its ontological status is the question of what kind of entity the novel is. Is it something material? Mental? Abstract? Or is it some other kind of object?

Strawson's answer in *Individuals* comes when he discusses the tendency of "empirically or nominalistically minded philosophers" (1959, 230) to

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[6]   In fact, I even restrict myself to the mode of existence of musical and literary works of art.

reduce non-particular entities, for example, abstractions, to particulars. Strawson says that this kind of reduction is sometimes quite natural, sometimes less so, sometimes very artificial, and sometimes ostensibly impossible. Words and sentences are among the abstract entities that are not eliminable according to Strawson. In his view,

> the suggestion that, for instance, sentences about words or sentences should be paraphrased into sentences about 'inscriptions', is apt, except in the bosom of the really fanatical nominalist, to produce nothing but nausea. (ibid.)

At this point, Strawson introduces a distinction between non-particulars that are well-entrenched in the language and those that are poorly entrenched. He notes that, for instance, qualities (like anger) and activities (like swimming) are poorly entrenched. It is easy and natural to eliminate the reference to the quality anger in a sentence like "Anger impairs the judgment" by way of a paraphrase that makes no mention of the abstract entity *anger*. Instead of "Anger impairs the judgment" we can say, for instance: "People are generally less capable of arriving at sound judgments when they are angry than when they are not" (1959, 231). Anger as a separate abstract entity disappears in the reworded sentence and is replaced by angry people. However, many abstract entities, for example, types, are well-entrenched, or at least better entrenched, if we are to believe Strawson.

Traditionally, words and sentences are the paradigm examples of types. The Shakespearean line "Words, words, words"[7] contains three words in the sense that it contains three word-tokens. Yet from another point of view it contains only one word, that is repeated three times: only one word-type occurs in the sentence. Strawson conceives of types as abstract entities instantiated by their various tokens.

Words and sentences may be paradigmatic types, but the concept of a type is often applied to other kinds of phenomena as well, such as cars, flags, and, more pertinently in our context, works of art. Strawson writes:

> Sentence-types and word-types seem well-entrenched. So do numbers. So do various other kinds of things to which the general title of "types", often, though rather waveringly, confined to words and sentences, may well be extended. I have in mind, for example: works of art, such as musical and literary compositions… (ibid.)

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[7] *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 191 – 92.

As we can see, Strawson regards musical and literary compositions as types – as abstract entities of a kind – and as being well-entrenched in our language. Strawson goes on to remark that a non-particular may be well-entrenched for two different reasons: because it is difficult to eliminate, or because there is no strong wish to eliminate it. Strawson speaks of these varieties as "logical" and "psychological" entrenchment respectively (1959, 232). He does not indicate whether he thinks that concepts of musical and literary compositions are well-entrenched because of the difficulty in managing without them, or because of the absence of a strong desire to do without them, or a combination of the two.

Psychological entrenchment has to do with the motivation or the lack of motivation to eliminate the abstract entities. The only possible motive envisaged in *Individuals* is "zeal for reductionist paraphrase" (ibid.), which I assume refers to nominalist predilections. The Searlean perspective introduced in the last section makes it natural to point to another possible kind of reason for elimination, namely pragmatic considerations. If elimination is feasible, the choice between elimination and non-elimination may be a question of what course of action leads to the more desirable effects. Which of them will create more insight? Which will be more economical? And so forth.

Stephen Davies' Ontology of Art

The views of the ontology of art put forward in Strawson's *Individuals* are by no means outdated. To all intents and purposes, they are the perceptions that today, fifty years later, continue to dominate the discourse about the ontology of art in analytical aesthetics.[8] The work of art is thought to be an abstract entity, and to be "well-entrenched", indeed, to be non-eliminable. As I have already indicated, such ideas are clearly revealed in, for example, Stephen Davies' article "Ontology of Art" (2003), arguably the most ambitious and best informed contemporary overview of the topic.

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[8] At least that is my impression, but cf. note 14 below. See Stephen Davies for an overview of the situation in 2003. David Davies has later argued, in his *Art as Performance* (2004), that works of art are performance-tokens (see, e.g., p. 141), and thus not abstract, but I believe that that is a minority view. David Davies also appears to regard it as unavoidable to use the concept of a work of art.

Davies explicitly maintains that works of art that can have many instances are abstract entities.[9] This applies to musical compositions, which can have many performances, and literary compositions, which can exist in many copies. Davies also denies that musical and literary works are in fact eliminable in favour of their instances. For Davies, it is wrong to believe that only the instances truly exist – the musical performances, the printed scores, the book volumes, and so forth – while references to the works themselves are nothing more than an indirect but efficient way of speaking of the instances.[10] According to him, we cannot reformulate sentences about works into sentences about copies of works, as we could rephrase the sentence about anger as a sentence about angry people in Strawson's example. Davies writes:

> It could be maintained that 'the work is so-and-so' is equivalent to holding that most of its instances are so-and-so, or that all its well-formed instances are so-and-so. Still, it does seem obvious that works of art have properties other than those of all, or even most, of their correct instances. For example, the piece can be created in France, performed simultaneously in Germany and Greece, and be the last of its artist's juvenilia, with none of these things being true of all or most of its well-formed performances.

Here, Davies points to two possible strategies for translating talk of works into talk of instances of works and demonstrates that they fail. By doing so, he wishes to make it credible that talk of works cannot successfully be translated into talk of instances of works. Something will remain untranslatable: there will be properties that are particular to the works-as-such. To me, however, the argument appears irrelevant. It is certainly true that *Emma* has properties that are not shared by any of its instances, like that of being the last novel Jane Austen completed, but this proves nothing about the eliminability of the concept of the literary work. The cardinal question in that context must be whether we can manage equally well without the concept of the literary work, that is, whether we can say everything we need to say about literature without invoking the concept.

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[9]   Davies (2003, 169). All subsequent quotations from Stephen Davies come from the same page.

[10] In that connection, Stephen Davies explicitly discusses Rudner's "The Ontological Status of the Esthetic Object" (but leaves later and more considered versions of the idea aside; cf. note 1 above).

Let us look at the matter from a different angle and distinguish between "work-language" and "non-work-language". Both languages include the concepts of a performance, a script, a book-volume, a text, et cetera, but only work-language includes the concept of a musical or literary work, a concept that is absent from non-work language. What Davies proves is that there can be no mechanical way of translating work-language statements into non-work-language statements. But why should there be? Translating from work-language into non-work-language may be complicated, but that does not prove anything about the viability of non-work-language as such. If we can say everything we need to say about literature in non-work language, that is, if we can say it without invoking the concept of a literary work, it is clearly demonstrated that the concept is in fact eliminable.

It is actually not difficult to construct a functional non-work-language. Let us hold on to *Emma* as our example – it would be easy to generalize the strategy to other literary works, and also to musical compositions, but I will not shoulder that task here. The foundation of my non-work-language is a defining physical object – Austen's original manuscript, or some copy of that manuscript that is deemed unobjectionable. That physical object, which I shall call "the *Emma*-exemplar", represents a text in the sense of a sequence of signs, and the text has a meaning. Let us call these "the *Emma*-text" and "the *Emma*-meaning". The *Emma*-exemplar can also be copied. An adequate copy, what I shall call an "*Emma*-copy", will be required to represent the *Emma*-text and to consequently stand for the *Emma*-meaning.[11]

It is easy to express in this non-work-language the kinds of states of affairs that Davies presented as untranslatable properties of works. The work-language statement that *Emma* was written in England will roughly correspond to the non-work-language statement that the *Emma*-text was composed in England. The work-language statement that the novel

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[11] The same text, in the sense of the same sequence of signs, can carry different meanings. (Think of "It's three o'clock" uttered seriously or uttered as a grammatical example, or of the same sentence uttered at night or uttered in the afternoon.) Consequently, having a specific text is not really sufficient for being an *Emma*-copy. A copy must also be a reproduction of an exemplar, performed with the intent of creating a new object carrying the same text and meaning. If you copy the *Emma*-exemplar, you get an *Emma*-copy. The *Emma*-copy can be copied in its turn. An *Emma*-copy is a copy of (a copy of…) the *Emma*-exemplar.

is read all over the world will roughly correspond to the non-work-language statement that *Emma*-copies are read all over the world, that is, that there are countries all over the world in which there are persons that have read or are reading an *Emma*-copy. The work-language statement that *Emma* is "the climax of Jane Austen's genius"[12] will correspond to something like the non-work-language statement that the composing of the *Emma*-text with the *Emma*-meaning was the most genial act Jane Austen ever performed. In short, the non-work-language permits us to say everything we need to say about literature without invoking the concept of a literary work. Furthermore, the non-work-language does so without introducing any new problematic notions, because even if we speak in work-language we will need the concepts that are instrumental in non-work-language: those of a copy of the novel, an authoritative copy of the novel, the novel's text, and the novel's meaning. The non-work-language makes the notion of the work-as-such disappear without introducing any new notions in its place.

Many of my readers will no doubt object that the concept of a work has been smuggled into my non-work-language through the back door. I have even used the work-name "*Emma*" in speaking of the *Emma*-exemplar, *Emma*-copies, the *Emma*-text, and the *Emma*-meaning.

The use of the work-name "*Emma*" is easily avoided: I could have spoken of, say, the A-exemplar, et cetera. However, the idea of the work is undeniably present in the non-work-language in the guise of the idea of a network of instances belonging together, that is, in the mutual relatedness of the various copies with their common text and meaning. Yet, while the concept of the work is present in a sense, it is not present in the relevant sense. If we mean by "the concept of the work" precisely the conception that all these copies belong together as a group because they are meant to be more or less interchangeable, then the concept of a work lies hidden in the notion of the mutual relatedness of the instances, but if we mean by "the concept of the work" the concept of an extra, abstract object that exists over and above the concrete instances, then the non-work-language does not make use of the concept of the work. And it is

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[12] "*Emma* is the climax of Jane Austen's genius and the Parthenon of fiction" Blythe (1966, 7).

the work in the second sense, the supposedly non-eliminable abstract entity, that the present discussion is about.[13]

Davies also has a second argument for the non-eliminability of the musical and literary work. He writes:

> Moreover, a conception of the work has a role in determining what is to count as a well-formed instance, especially where the work is presented and transmitted via an exemplar. Without a notion of the work as distinct from its exemplar, we could not judge if renditions based on, but differing in some details from, its exemplar were well-formed instances of the piece.

The problem Davies refers to, and states that the idea of the work helps us solve, is this: Given an exemplar, an authoritative copy, how do we know what features we need to copy in order to produce a new, well-formed instance of the work?

The problem is real enough, but I cannot see how the concept of the work could help us solve it. Davies says that "a conception of the work has a role in determining what is to count as a well-formed instance". Once again, "a conception of the work" can be taken in two ways. First, it can mean the idea that several instances are mutually related, or interchangeable, as copies of the same work. Without a conception of the work in that sense – a conception which I embrace – the question of what is to count as a well-formed instance will not even arise, for the idea of a well-formed instance will lose its point. Second, "a conception of the work" can mean the idea of the work-as-such as constituting an extra, abstract entity. However, that idea cannot in itself help us determine what is to count as a well-formed instance. Confronted with an exemplar, an authoritative copy, we will have to *decide* what to require from well-formed copies of that copy – for example, in the case of a novel, what text any other well-formed copy of the work should represent. Having made that *decision*, we will have introduced identity criteria of the text of the work. Thereby we will have *created* a conception of the

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[13]   In 1977, Joseph Margolis argued that works of art are types, but that types have no independent existence: to be a type is to be a group of tokens belonging together in a specific manner. "There are no types that are separable from tokens", he wrote, "because there are no tokens except tokens-of-a-type. The very process for individuating tokens entails individuating types, that is, entails individuating different sets of particulars as the alternative tokens of this or that type" (1977, 49). My distinction between two senses of "the work of art" parallels Margolis's distinction between a type as separable from tokens and a type as inseparable from tokens.

work or made such a conception more precise. The conception can then help us to assess whether new presumptive copies are well-formed, but it is clearly the decision concerning what to require from a correct copy that gives definite form to the idea of what the work consists of, not the other way round.

There is also another way of answering Davies' second argument. Davies says that without a notion of the work as distinct from its exemplar, we could not judge if renditions based on, but differing in some details from, its exemplar were well-formed instances of the piece. However, we certainly could, because the notion of the *Emma*-text, which is also a non-work-language notion, will help us determine whether presumptive *Emma*-copies are well-formed instances. If we know the *Emma*-text, we will be able to distinguish between correct and incorrect copies. We will not need the notion of *Emma*-the-work as a separate, abstract entity.

Concluding Reflections

The argument presented here should have demonstrated that we can in fact manage without the concept of a musical or literary composition, but do we have any reason to actually do so? Is it not highly counterintuitive that something could be seriously unsatisfactory about the concept of a musical or literary or linguistic composition? Can our conceptual scheme really be in need of any substantial amendment on that point?

I believe it is wise to preserve an open mind when it comes to such issues. The history of human thought is full of radical rethinking. It is instructive to read Paul Thagard's book from 1992, *Conceptual Revolutions*. There, Thagard reviews a number of comprehensive conceptual reorientations in various areas or disciplines from the nineteenth century onwards. He starts with the concept of phlogiston, the fire-substance, which was once one of the cornerstones of chemical theory but was later made obsolete by new ways of understanding combustion, that were organized around the notion of oxygen. The concept of phlogiston has simply been dropped; fire is not a chemical element any more. Several later examples are reviewed in Thagard's text, beginning with the revision of the idea of biological kinds brought about by Darwin's ideas. One could object that these are scientific examples and do not concern a revision of our conceptual scheme in metaphysics. It is, however, an

open question whether the understanding of musical, literary, and linguistic communication falls within the domain of metaphysics. Anyway, the key difference between work-language and non-work-language only concerns the existence of musical and literary compositions; it cannot be characterized as a difference in metaphysical assumptions except in that extremely local respect.

It is also worth remembering the ambiguity of the expression "the concept of a work of art". I have argued for the eliminability of the concept of the work of art as an extra abstract entity over and above its concrete instances, but I have by no means attempted to manage without the concept of the work of art understood as the idea of a network of instances that are, in principle, interchangeable.

Moreover, because of my Searle-inspired view of conceptual relativity, I am not forced to make a definite choice between work-language and non-work-language. In terms of the previous maps analogy: the two languages can be seen as two different maps of the same terrain, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. There is no one and only true map of France, and there is no one and only true picture of literary or musical communication.

Indeed the difference between work-language and non-work-language is not, for me, the difference between fiction and reality. Both languages *construe* pictures of realities; they both introduce *constructions*. This is worth pointing out, since philosophers tend to present their statements about the ontology of art as true-or-false assertions about what there is.[14] For example, Richard Rudner, against whom Davies' arguments for the non-eliminability of these notions are directed, speaks of names of works of art as "convenient shorthand" (1950, 385), while Davies explicitly denies that "our talk of works is fictional".

Rudner's characterization of names of works of art as convenient shorthand seems to imply that there is a longhand which offers the true way of describing the corresponding realities, and I do not subscribe to that idea. On the other hand, I find Davies' denial of the fictionality of

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[14] Lately, however, some philosophers have argued that musical works do not really exist (or, put in Searlean terms, do not have a language-independent existence), or that musical works do not necessarily exist, but regarded the work-language as being no less useful for that. See Cameron (2008) and Kania (2008). Naturally enough, Cameron and Kania do not think of these views as eliminativism with regard to musical works: Cameron (2008, 304); Kania (2008, 441).

works of art to be ambiguous. *Emma* certainly exists in the sense that *Emma* is an established element of our social reality. In that sense, it is easy to agree that the concept of the novel *Emma* is not a fiction, but the concept could be called fictional in the sense that the novel has no language-independent existence: If humankind were wiped out, there would no longer be any *Emma* in the world.

Having said this, however, I must add that I regard work-language as providing a seriously misleading picture of literary or musical communication. There is no way of demonstrating its limitations here, no way of opening the wide-ranging discussion that that would require, but I will nevertheless attempt to explain how I view the situation.

Work-language offers a simple and handy picture. Work-language is familiar and easy to use, and it offers us concise and economical ways of speaking. These are extremely important practical advantages, and I would not want us to stop using work-language in everyday contexts, but the simplicity of work-language is bought at a price. Work-language is illogical and distorting, and I would want us to learn to get along without it when we are theorizing about literary and musical communication or, for that matter, about verbal communication in general.[15]

First, I would like to point to the logical aspect of the issue. According to our ordinary way of thinking and speaking, a literary work, or indeed any verbal composition, has a physical dimension. It exists outside both author and reader, as the physical vehicle of their communication. At the same time, however, the work or verbal composition has a text, and thus also a meaning. The text and the meaning are abstract entities, so the work or composition will in fact be conceived of as being at once physical and abstract. That creates a philosophical problem.

Then there are also semantic and interpretative pitfalls. As previously stated, the work or composition is understood as having meaning. When the reader encounters a copy of *Emma*, he is thought to encounter *Emma*, and *Emma* is supposed to be in possession of its whole meaning, which is

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[15] It is, in principle, well known that work-language is illogical. Thirty years ago, Michael Reddy exposed the metaphors underlying our ordinary-language talk of communication in his article "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language" (1979). Later discussions have added refinements, but the substantial correctness of Reddy's account has not been questioned, as far as I know. My description of the work of art below largely parallels Reddy's description of the communicative message as pictured by ordinary language.

there for the reader to retrieve. However, that picture of the state of affairs is distorting. It is more true to the facts to say that the reader encounters a physical copy, a bunch of white sheets of paper that are patterned with printer's ink, and that the reader interprets these marks. Up to a certain point, interpretation will be objective: all competent readers will decipher the marks in more or less the same way, arriving at more or less the same content. However, beyond that point, conventions will fail to provide definite guidance, and the reader's understanding of the text will be more or less subjective. And neither will it be the case that the "real" meaning is somehow there, hidden in the work or composition, as our ordinary way of thinking and speaking will have us believe. Ordinary language paints an illusory picture, sending our theories of utterance meaning and verbal interpretation on wild goose chases. Analogous remarks could be made about music.

My critical, and naturally controversial, view of work-language and its problems cannot be effectively defended within the confines of a paper. It would take a book-length study to explain in depth how and why the concept of a musical or literary work of art, or of a linguistic composition in general, leads our understanding of musical and verbal communication astray. For me, however, it is this cluster of semantic and interpretative problems that gives the question of the ontology of musical and literary works – and of ordinary linguistic compositions – its deeper interest.[16]

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