

PART I

SYSTEM AND METHOD

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DANTO AS SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHER, OR *COMME ON LIT DANTO* *EN FRANÇAIS*

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It is of less importance to enact the ritual task of philosophical journeymanhood – putting holes in leaking conceptual vessels – than to ponder whether this vessel will serve our purpose even if sound.

Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*

There are three ways that the history of philosophy may be thought of: in Descartes' way; as Hegelian historicists do; and as Derrida does. The first view is that the essential philosophical problems are there, waiting to be discovered. The history of philosophy is the story of the discovery of these problems which, because they are problems about the structures of our thought about the world, do not change with time. We associate problems with the names "Plato" or "Kant," but these problems can be connected with work done at other times. Descartes' *Meditations* sets forward positions on much-discussed issues without indicating how he was influenced by the earlier literature.

Second, the history of philosophy *is* the history of reflection on these issues. It is impossible to distinguish between how these problems are understood and how they are described by philosophers. Schopenhauer thinks differently from Descartes because Hume and Kant intervene between him and his precursors. There is no way to identify the problems as such apart from mentioning the proper names of the philosophers who deal with them. For the Hegelian historicist, not all things are possible at all times.

A third, Derridian, position claims not just that ways of thinking about these issues have changed, but that we cannot even describe the earlier positions in our vocabulary.¹ The belief that Descartes, Hume, Wittgenstein, and Davidson are concerned with

Danto and His Critics, Second Edition. Edited by Mark Rollins.

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“the same problems” may be an illusion. When we use our language to describe Descartes’ work, inevitably we will get things wrong because we must translate his account of what we call mental representation into our language. Descartes’ view of representation differs so radically from ours that it is unclear how they may be compared. The problem is not translating his Latin or French into our English; but translating an alien conceptual scheme. The medium of talk, language, is itself a system of representation. There is no way around this problem, no neutral way of talking about philosophical problems. Discussion of the theory of representation uses one or another medium of linguistic representation. And that language involves philosophical presuppositions.

Baudelaire’s poetry does not entirely translate into English, which lacks equivalent rhymes and rhythms; but we can explain in English roughly what has been lost. In philosophy the situation is different. We can say a lot about older ways of talking about representation and about our ways of describing them; what is lacking is the possibility of comparing them. Since each way of talking employs a different, incommensurable view of representation there is no sense in which some common topic is being discussed.

Perhaps Derrida’s position is not coherent. If no way of comparing these views is accessible, how can we know that the same issues are being discussed? In fact, since we think that Descartes discusses issues of concern to modern philosophers, how can there not be some overlap between his position and ours? But perhaps we can only talk about Descartes in our terms, aware that we are doing violence to his way of talking. Even if there is no possibility of indicating exactly the nature of that violence, beyond knowing that we cannot “get things right,” still we may know that it is impossible for us to accurately discuss his work.

I use this admittedly schematic account to introduce Danto’s work. His very basic anti-Derridian assumption is that we can talk about the earlier philosophical models in our language. And his anti-historicist view is that the philosophical problems themselves can be discussed without needing to worry about exactly who said what. He discusses the great traditional philosophers, but does not think that identifying the positions they hold requires a historical analysis of their place in the tradition. Danto holds a Cartesian view of the history of philosophy.

Danto’s anti-Derridian view is implicit everywhere in his books on Nietzsche and Sartre, whose working assumption is that Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s concerns may be translated into the language of analytic philosophy. So Danto’s *Jean-Paul Sartre* translates his concepts into ours; what Sartre calls “shame” is a version of our “problem of other minds.” Analytic philosophy is often criticized for being ahistorical, and for lacking a genuine interest in other philosophic traditions. While Danto’s system is in one way self-consciously ahistorical, he certainly takes an interest in “alien” philosophical systems. “I have quarried Sartre’s work . . . over the years, taken fragments of his thought which I would never . . . have been able to think of by myself . . . he is part of my history and world.”² Only when he goes a bit farther afield geographically and temporally, in his book on Oriental philosophy, does he define the limits of his determined cosmopolitanism.³ The trouble with analytic philosophy, poststructuralists say, is that it treats its parochial concerns as if they were universally valid. The force of that very general complaint is easier to understand if we focus on one detail of Danto’s

analysis – his use of visual models – which poststructuralists like Derrida reject. Because such metaphors play a special role in Danto's aesthetics, I focus on that part of his philosophical system.

The relation of a systematic writer's aesthetics to his philosophical system is complex. For some philosophers – Plato in Danto's account and Kant according to some commentators – philosophy plays a central role in revealing structures of the mind we would not otherwise know.⁴ That there are artworks changes the entire way that the world and its representations are thought of. For Schopenhauer, artworks provide privileged access to the nature of things, permitting us to experience the unity of the world as will, which normally we can only know as representation. For Nietzsche, tragedy provides privileged access to the history of European culture.

For Danto, aesthetic theory is not a special source of knowledge in these ways. The indistinguishable indiscernibles, the basis for his account of knowledge and action, appear also when we look at art. But this doesn't show that artworks are kinds of entities which reveal anything to a philosopher about the world. Artworks are not identical with the physical objects from which they are indistinguishable. In this way they are like representations; indeed, and this raises potential complications, many of them *are* representations. But, so far as I can see, the ontological status of art does not influence Danto's larger system. Of course, that system was developed before he published the body of his work on aesthetics. But when the materials in *Analytical History of Knowledge* and *Analytical Philosophy of Action* are reworked in his recent *Connections to the World* they are not redeveloped in any radical way. There is no reason why they should be. The structure of argument in Danto's aesthetic mirrors that presented in his larger philosophy, without modifying its conclusions.

No special light is shed on the basic metaphysical problem, how we know the world in our representations and change it in our actions, by art. This perhaps is one reason why Danto's involvement in the artworld did not lead him early on to write about aesthetics. His interest in art, and his art criticism, has relatively few philosophical consequences.⁵ In this way, Danto's aesthetic, like his historiography, developed earlier in *Analytical Philosophy of History*, stands outside the central concerns of his system. That our ways of knowing the world and acting have changed has no especial importance for his discussion of knowledge and action, in which the positions of Plato, Berkeley, Kant, and other classic figures are juxtaposed to the arguments of Austin, Wittgenstein, and other, more recent philosophers. That the various positions were discovered at particular historical moments plays no important role in Danto's commentary. That the various sciences of mind have advanced does not transform the structure of the philosophical problems.

Given Danto's view of the general relation between science and philosophy in which philosophical argumentation is, as he says, at right angles to scientific research, it is hard to see how research could have any effect on philosophy. Even a philosopher so uninterested in history as Wittgenstein depended, in his early work, upon the then recent discoveries of logicians. And, of course, today some philosophers of mind argue that cognitive psychology has transformed the whole discipline. Danto refers to recent scientific research, but never suggests that it can have any transformative effect on thought about conceptual problems.

This is why Danto's work on aesthetics seems to subtly transform the orientation of his whole way of thought, only implicitly, perhaps, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* but certainly explicitly in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. In so far as Danto's whole aesthetic originates from the need to define art so as to include Duchamp's ready-mades and Warhol's artifacts, he is dealing with questions which could only concern a modern aesthetician. Unlike epistemology, which for him does not depend in any deep way upon the science of psychology, aesthetics does depend upon creations of modern artists.

Plato, Kant, or Hegel could not have foreseen the problems discussed in Danto's aesthetic, which is why their accounts of art have only limited relevance to his. Danto's view of action or knowledge may be Cartesian but once he introduces this historical dimension into his aesthetic, it is natural to ask whether he shares some assumptions with the historicist.⁶ In this way, his aesthetic, like his epistemology and theory of action, are akin to his historiography. That standards of historical explanation have changed does not show that his historiography need be a historical account. Hegel, Marx, and various modern historians introduce new tools of historical explanation, but they do not therefore demand a different analysis from the work of Thucydides; any more than work in modern psychology, which makes Descartes' view of perception merely of antiquarian interest, changes how Danto understands mental activity.⁷ The properly philosophical problems of explaining a historical narrative, as opposed to dealing with such conceptual innovations as materialist dialectics, are problems posed by the very structure of a historical narrative. And those accounts appear early on in our culture.

This is why "the end of art" seems, as Danto says, to challenge the entire framework of his system. For here it is not just the case that historically novel forms of art change the definition of art, but that he makes a claim which takes us much closer to historicism. Since the very standards of what counts as art are historically variable, aesthetic theory must have a historical dimension. My aim here is not to critically discuss that definition of art, which has been done by many aestheticians, but to see how it fits into the way of thinking about philosophy's history which is developed within Danto's philosophical system.

In Danto's epistemology, theory of action, and historiography there is, as I said, no such historical dimension; nor is one even possible. But if historicism enters Danto's philosophy here in his aesthetic, it is an odd form of historicism. The thesis of "the end of art" is that the history of art has ended because no further artistic developments are possible. Aestheticians can define "art," secure in the knowledge that no possible future counterexamples can upset that theory in the way that abstract painting upset the theory that art is mimesis. Looking back, that essay seems a necessary supplement to *The Transfiguration*, which is reason to wonder whether it really marks a break in Danto's work. *The Transfiguration* takes issue with the once-influential Wittgenstein theorizing which held that art has no essence, its different forms having family resemblances like those which in his later philosophy link language games. For a Wittgensteinian, the proliferation of new artforms could continue indefinitely, for new artforms always are similar in some ways to older art. Watteau does not paint history scenes as did Poussin and Raphael, but he too makes representations; Motherwell's abstractions are not representations, but he also makes art by applying paint to canvas. And so on. In such a Wittgensteinian account, even the most untraditional art can have family resemblances to what came earlier.⁸

No doubt this example employs the idea of family resemblances in a mechanical fashion. What is left aside are the ways in which novel art can really challenge its viewers. But, ultimately, there need be no problem in understanding how the most radically unconventional work also is art. For Danto this is not the case. If artists could go beyond Duchamp and Warhol, then perhaps these innovative works would not be covered by his definition of art. Claiming that the history of art has ended guarantees that there can be no future counterexamples to Danto's definition of art. There can be no counterexamples because it is in principle impossible for art to innovate in any way deep enough to yield a counterexample.⁹ Art after Warhol only consists in variations on well-established themes. This is not necessarily to say that artmaking will cease, though it is true that the exciting history of recent American art has depended upon the belief that new revolutionary rejections of tradition would occur. As Danto recognizes, that he offers a variation on a theme of Hegel may raise real problems.¹⁰ It is hard to think of a historical prediction which failed more miserably than Hegel's early nineteenth-century claim that the future of art had ended. As far as I can make out, Hegel, unlike Danto, relied upon a very abstract philosophical argument, not upon the study of art of his time. For Hegel, history as such ends in his time, and so the history of art ends. For Danto, art's history ends, but history as such need not end.

That Danto's aesthetic here depends upon a historical study of arts, while his epistemology, theory of action, and historiography do not depend upon a comparable study of the disciplines they examine, does not show any inconsistency in his philosophical system. If art differs in this way from knowledge, action, and history, that means that its philosophical investigation will need to proceed differently. Aesthetics cannot properly develop until art's history has ended. The theory of action and knowledge reflect upon everyday experience, and so their concerns could have developed anytime. Aesthetics studies the work of Duchamp and Warhol, and so Danto's definition of art could only have been written after they made their art.

The concerns of modern epistemology were laid out by Descartes, who could hardly have sympathized with the interest in historical explanation of Hegel's precursor, Vico. Philosophy of history, which owes a great debt to Vico, thus developed later than aesthetics, but whatever the causes of that delayed development, they do not for a Cartesian affect a philosophical analysis of these disciplines. After Duchamp, pre-modernist aesthetics is of merely historical interest, for no mere philosopher could have predicted the development of modernist art. But it is important not to confuse an account of the origin of a discipline with an analysis of its present state. For all of Danto's sympathy with Nietzsche, he is not even tempted to adopt that writer's view that an analysis of philosophical problems requires a genealogy. For Danto, the origin of our analysis does not explain how to evaluate that argumentation. Danto thus could agree that "art is essentially historical," but without accepting the obvious suggestion that thus a historicist concern has been introduced into the philosophy of art.¹¹

Danto repeatedly identifies Descartes as a model philosopher, someone whose analysis of knowledge supplies a model for Danto's account of action, historiography, and aesthetics as well. But in one way, at least, Descartes' view of the relationship of science and philosophy is very different from Danto's. Descartes conceived of himself as scientist as

well as philosopher, and of his *Dioptrics* as a natural continuation of the *Meditations*, a scientific program inspired by his philosophical analysis. Today Descartes' science is merely quaint; it is his philosophy which remains of interest.¹²

But this way of reading Descartes presupposes Danto's very modern distinction between philosophy and science. Danto distinguishes between the epistemology, which he takes seriously, and the argument for God, which like many modern readers he seems to dismiss. Descartes the philosopher, as distinct from Descartes the writer with a science and theology, is the product of this division of his texts in ways which he would no doubt find surprising. And this point could be generalized if we look at Danto's readings of other pre-twentieth-century philosophers, which must be extremely selective to extract from them anticipations of his philosophical position. Danto must detach Hume's view of the self from his psychology and history; and Hegel's claims about the end of art from his logic and social philosophy.

This point is still more obvious when we turn to Danto's highly sympathetic reconstructions of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Sartre. He extracts an argument from those strangers to the analytic tradition. Some commentators treat them as figures in the history of ideas, and that refusal to really believe that they offer philosophical arguments is a way of insulating ourselves from their ideas, which seem so alien to the concerns of the analytic tradition that they are readily dismissed. Danto's procedure requires radical surgery on the corpus of their texts. Sartre becomes a post-Cartesian philosopher of mind, whose idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxism is detachable from that part of his system of interest.¹³

This is necessary if we are to read such writers as philosophers, and not just as writers influential in the history of ideas. Pre-twentieth-century philosophers and twentieth-century non-analytic philosophers held different views of the relationship of philosophy to other disciplines from Danto, who can find anticipations of his ahistorical view of philosophy in their texts only by only by making distinctions that they did not recognize. This does not say anything about the validity of Danto's analysis, but does perhaps subtly undermine his Cartesian view of philosophy, showing he cannot entirely insulate his analysis from the forces of historical change. The reason that Danto's view of the relation of philosophy to science differs from Descartes' is that we have obvious problems with Descartes' science. When he argues that no machine can act intelligently, we observe that when the model of such a machine was clockwork, it was impossible to imagine computers.¹⁴ That computers exist does not show that machines can think. But until such machines were created, it was hard to see that this claim was worth discussion.

Understood this way, Danto's epistemology starts to look more like his aesthetics than I allowed earlier. It is the product of a historically modern sensibility. Only when science and art had developed to a certain point was proper analysis of philosophical problems possible. Once Descartes' science became unworkable, we could see how to do epistemology, and distinguish it from the unprofitable approaches of Cartesian astronomy and optics; once Duchamp made his readymades, we could understand how to define art. Philosophy does not evolve historically, but only becomes possible at a certain historical moment.¹⁵ Although this historical analysis says nothing about the validity of Danto's philosophy, it does suggest one problem with his system. Looking critically at the history of the relation

between philosophy and the disciplines – science, theology, art history, political theory – which separated themselves from philosophy, it is natural to observe that a seemingly irreversible trend restricts ever more the domain of philosophy. Plato’s political theory, like Descartes’ science and Berkeley’s theology, astonish the modern philosopher, who has a more restricted vision of what philosophy can accomplish.

It would take the subtlety of Nietzsche to do justice to the psychologically complex role Danto assigns to the philosopher, which teases, promising so much, but offering what can seem so little. The striking contrast between the promise of a revelation which, quite apart from that provided by science, shows us the structure of everything; and the result that, since this structure is consistent with whatever science discovers, knowing it changes nothing of how we understand or act, is uncanny. Some philosophers of science think that knowing physics or psychology changes our worldview; Marx believed his critique of philosophy a key to action. Danto will have none of that. One natural critical question is whether, if this is all philosophy can do, it is worth doing. Perhaps philosophy continues to be studied because of a sort of institutional inertia. Once we observe this historical trend, it is natural to ask whether in the end anything can remain of philosophy. Danto’s heroic attempt to insulate philosophy from developments within science (and art) may not accomplish anything, not if this historical trend continues. Danto implicitly assumes that this trend will not continue. Rather than evaluate his arguments for that claim directly, I seek an external framework from which to evaluate his entire philosophy, that provided by his concept of representation.

Analysis of representation is complex because it must itself employ the very tools whose structure it would explain. At this point the concerns of analytic philosophers and poststructuralism diverge. What separates Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault from analytic philosophers – and runs across all of the obvious differences between those three thinkers – is insistence that using language, a means of representation, requires sensitivity to its rhetorical aspects, the ways in which there never can be any hard and fast distinction between form and content in representation. There is no absolute distinction between how we say something and what we say.

The analytic philosopher, if I am typical, will find Derrida’s essay “Différance” difficult.¹⁶ What are we to make of this neologism which “is read, or . . . is written, but . . . cannot be heard. It cannot be apprehended in speech”? One of my attempts to teach the history of analytic philosophy brought home to me some of the real ways in which “différance” can be a problem. Seeking the advice of a more experienced colleague, I asked verbally for recommendations about what to read “on sense and reference.” I was asking for advice about *the best commentary* on Frege’s essay, but my colleague, taking me to ask about *the concepts* of sense and reference, replied that the best text was Frege’s famous essay.

If this potential failure of communication is what Derrida’s analysis is about, that is not very much. Confusion between reference to a title and to concepts is easily corrected; it is hard to imagine how our discussion could have gone much further without both of us being aware that my question was confusing in this way. It is true that this misunderstanding delayed understanding of what was going on, but I hesitate to conclude that this is the “deferral” Derrida talks about. There is no way that an analytic philosopher will follow Derrida into a discussion of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud. That may be the case, but all

it shows is what is shown by Danto's *Jean-Paul Sartre*, when each chapter title refers first to the concerns of analytic philosophy and then to those of continental philosophy. Saying that Derrida's concerns can be translated into the terms of analytic philosophy is not to claim that they can be entirely translated into that conceptually distant idiom. That would be over-optimistic.¹⁷

Poststructuralists differ from analytic philosophers who tend to suppose that plain and straightforward language communicates directly.¹⁸ The rhetorician rejects that conclusion; for him plain speaking is merely another trope, an alternative to ornate prose.¹⁹ For the rhetorician, as for the poststructuralist, there is no neutral medium of linguistic representation. But the same questions reappear, unavoidably, in the center of Danto's philosophy, the doctrine of indistinguishable indiscernibles. And so here a rhetorical analysis of the literary structures of his texts can tell us something about how to evaluate their argument.

A man believes something, and has good reasons for that belief. The belief is correct, but not for those reasons. "I see *n* wearing a new suit, which justifies me . . . in believing that *n* has bought a new suit. And he has bought a new suit! Only it is not the one he is wearing, which has been bought by his twin brother."²⁰ A man tries to do something, and has good reasons to believe that his action causes an event. That event does happen, but not because he causes it. *N* "flicks the switch and the light goes on . . . it seems plausible . . . that *n* made it happen . . . by flicking the switch. In this case . . . the circuit between this switch and the light has been lost by an inept electrician."²¹ And, to cite the parallel in aesthetics, a urinal indiscernible from Duchamp's *Fountain* is not an artwork, but only a plumbing fixture.

In every case, the analysis has this same four-stage structure:

- 1 Danto contrasts two states of affairs or things which seem identical. (He contrasts seeming actions and knowledge with the real thing.)
- 2 Danto shows that those seemingly indiscernible states of affairs or things are very different. Believing that an event has been caused or that the plumbing fixture is Duchamp's artwork is only possible when we confuse two very different things.
- 3 The dilemma is resolved by showing that what in stage (1) seemed to be indiscernibles are very different.
- 4 A theory of knowledge, action, or art explains why different states of affairs or things seem indiscernible. We now have come full circle, resolving in stage (4) the dilemma of stage (1).

If we focus not on this argumentation as such, but upon its rhetoric a strange conclusion emerges. The very idea that there are indiscernibles depends upon the particular narrative order of this account. The two things or states of affairs are not really identical. They could not be, for then Danto could never reach the fourth stage. But getting that far requires constructing his story so that at an earlier stage the two things or states of affairs seem to be identical. The indiscernibles are fictions essential to this four-stage narrative.

An analogy with the literary structure of Descartes' *Meditations* is suggestive. Descartes begins by throwing into doubt all of our capacities to know. When we discover that we can know neither the self nor the external world nor God, naturally we feel uncomfortable. And so the resolution of his narrative, in which knowledge of the self leads to the proof of God's

existence and the demonstration that we do know the external world, is immensely satisfying. Such a philosophical tale is like a Jane Austen novel in which, after those long trials whose resolution constitutes the story, the right man and woman do wed. A narrative of love at first sight to which there are no obstacles could no more be a satisfying story than a Cartesian demonstration that there is a self, a God, and an external world could provide satisfaction without first strenuously encouraging our capacity to doubt.

This parallel in the use of these structures leaves out one obvious essential difference between philosophical works and novels. An Austen novel is pleasurable to read, but the *Meditations* claims to be true. Analysis of the narrative structure of a novel may describe an essential feature of that book, since narrative closure is one important way in which a novel “pleasures” its readers. But philosophical arguments aim for truth, and the pleasure we get from a nicely presented account is merely an incidental bonus. Descartes wrote brilliantly; Kant did not. But if their arguments can be stated in so many words, concern with literary style really takes us outside their philosophical concerns. Such a distinction between what is internal to philosophy and what lies outside its bounds poststructuralism has questioned, arguing that no system of representation is neutral. Consider, then, an account of the four stages of Danto’s argumentation, modeled on this sketch of a commentary on Descartes.

Danto wants to identify the structures of the world, as they can be described by philosophy, and that, he claims, involves discovering that there can be these states of affairs or things which seem identical, but really are not. But that statement of identity/non-identity, and the claim that such indiscernibles exist, depends upon his narrative. It is only in his text that we find first apparent identity and then that there really is not identity. In the end, we discover differences between what seems to be knowledge, action, or art and what really is. It seems odd to conclude that these differences are a feature of the world, not of the particular way in which Danto describes it. Only in his text, and not in the world, do these differences exist. Danto’s arguments always depend upon limiting or framing our knowledge in stage (1), and opening up that frame in stage (3). Danto tells part of the story; draws a conclusion which turns out to be too hasty; and then finishes his philosophical narratives by showing the consequences of that too hasty conclusion.²²

The apparent paradox is that the artifacts of Duchamp and Warhol are visually indistinguishable from indiscernibles which are not artworks. That *Fountain* is visually indistinguishable from a fixture at the plumber’s leads Danto to conclude that therefore art cannot be defined by its visual qualities alone, but depends for its existence upon theorizing about art. Suppose this is true.²³ When we look beyond that thing itself, we see all the difference in the world between *Fountain* in the Philadelphia Museum and a urinal in the plumbing show. What does that show?

Inspired by Danto, I tell a story like his four-stage narrative, but with a twist. Often parts of two otherwise very different things look identical. I purchase a monochrome painting I think might be by Brice Marden, an artist I admire greatly. Anxious to have an expert check the color but not know that I own this valuable work, I construct a frame through which only a small square of the blue surface shows. But unknown to me, my daughter Elizabeth, needing a board for her game, takes the painting which she replaces with my copy of *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*, a book I value but not for the original blue cover which is visually indistinguishable under these circumstances from my now destroyed Marden.

This comparison does not show that Danto's book is indistinguishable from the painting. All we have learned is that a part of the book is indistinguishable from a part of the painting, not a very exciting or surprising conclusion. But exactly the same argument can apply to Danto's account of Duchamp. It seems absurd to compare the book and painting in that way, but not to compare Duchamp's artwork and the plumbing fixture, only because it is weird to isolate a small piece of a painting and a book, but not to isolate a free-standing object. Objects are the natural units for the curator to handle when she instructs the workmen to arrange *Fountain* in the display case. But Danto's argument shows that *the individual artwork* is not the right unit for the aesthete to handle when providing a conceptual analysis. The right unit is *that individual work in its setting in the museum*.

Analogous points can be made about Danto's account of action and knowledge. Once the right unit of analysis is identified, we distinguish actions and knowledge from what appears indiscernible from them. Philosophical argument teaches us how to locate the units for analysis. But when that is done, we discover that what initially appeared indiscernible really is not. The seeming paradox of stage (1) disappears in stage (3); we distinguish art from non-art, knowledge from mere belief, and genuine actions from what is indiscernible from them. There are no indiscernible pairs. If there were, these philosophical problems would be insoluble. Danto's talk of indiscernibles is really a vivid way of beginning his account. He is not identifying indiscernible things in the world, but describing the world in a way which gives the illusion that there are such things. His books, like Descartes' *Meditations*, dramatically present an argument. It is exciting when Descartes suggests that maybe we know nothing, it is surprising when Danto suggests that perhaps (some) artworks are indistinguishable from non-artworks. Danto's argument, like Descartes', could be presented without these dramas.

But the same point could hardly be made about the stories Jane Austen tells, which could not be paraphrased without leaving out something essential. This distinction between literature and philosophy is one reason to believe Danto's claim that they are different genres of writing.²⁴ Because Danto's account can be paraphrased, other philosophers can debate its claims. Literary critics evaluate Austen's novels, but there is nothing in her texts which can be argued with, as for a philosopher there is material for debate in Danto's books. Rejecting her politics is consistent with admiring her books; but demonstrating that Danto's philosophical arguments are bad leaves the philosopher nothing to admire in his books. If Descartes' critics are correct, his *Meditations* uses bad arguments. There is no comparable way in which *Pride and Prejudice* can be criticized. Philosophy writing, like literature, always has a style, but unlike literature its claims can be presented in another style, which is to say that in philosophy, but not in literature, there is a form/content distinction.

Summarizing Austen's plots is always a disputable procedure, since such a summary may leave out elements which on one interpretation are essential; but the same is not true in philosophy, at least if it is the case that it is possible to argue with a philosopher's arguments by taking them out of their original context. Perhaps someone can demonstrate that my account of Danto's arguments is wrong. Even so, the idea that such an account can be right or wrong distinguishes it from a commentary on a novel which,

unless it simply gets the facts wrong, is judged convincing or not. Austen does not have arguments, as does Danto.

Suppose *Analytical Philosophy of Action* were a novel. It would seem very strange to a reader whose model was provided by Austen. But judged by that model, many novels – those by Pynchon, DeLillo, and Octavia E. Butler – are strange. If a reader complains that Danto’s characters are too abstract, or his plotline is complex, I reply that we expect such complaints from someone who doesn’t know postmodernist writing. If his book were a novel, then Danto’s acknowledgments in the preface of philosopher colleagues and notes about previous publication of some portions would be misleading. But, after all, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* is a novel which is misleading in that way. That Danto’s last chapter, “Freedom,” concludes with a sentence which really does achieve narrative closure indicates that some of his concerns are not so alien from those of a creative writer. Austen might borrow some sentences from that chapter. And yet, if *Analytical Philosophy of Action* were a novel, there is one way in which we would treat it very differently from the way I have done. Because it is a philosophical treatise, I have summarized its argument, assuming as analytic philosophers do that its arguments can be preserved in an account which, though sensitive to its literary style, does not preserve that style. I have thus adopted a form/content distinction. An account of *Analytical Philosophy of Action* as novel would explain how the book worked, but it could not assume, as I have done, that some features of the book were aesthetically irrelevant, as in my survey of its philosophical content I assume that its literary features are irrelevant.²⁵

Consider *La transfiguration du banal*, the French version of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.²⁶ The title itself has a somewhat different sense, “commonplace” having a different sense from “banal,” which naturally suggests the French verb *banaliser*, to vulgarize. The French text translates Danto’s footnotes, adding some additional necessary explanations. Sometimes the translator notes the frequent uses of French in the original, a reminder that Danto is a good linguist; occasionally they are points of information, when Mark Rudd is identified as “dirigeant de la révolte étudiante sur le campus de l’université Columbia en 1968”; and at several points we learn that Danto’s analysis does not translate exactly, because his grammar or verbal ambiguities do not have an equivalent in French.²⁷

Danto’s title, derived, he explains, from the Muriel Spark novel which in French is called *Le bel âge de Miss Brodie*, makes its way into the French version of her text.²⁸ Had her book not been translated, that intertextuality which refers the English-language reader from the title of Danto’s book to the mention in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* of the title of an imaginary book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, written by her heroine, would not exist. As it is, the reader of Danto’s text in French can naturally make the same association as we readers in English. The French version of Danto’s book reminds a reader who knows his work in English that his style, as much as Lacan’s or Derrida’s, is a product of a culture whose concerns, familiar to insiders, need to be spelled out for outsiders. In translating Danto’s book into French, as in the translation of a novel, something will be lost, and a partial indication of that loss is provided by these footnotes. But Danto’s entire argument can be translated, for it is not dependent upon such stylistic details.

Style in philosophy is important because well-turned arguments like Descartes’ and Danto’s are likely to persuade. As rhetoricians emphasize, when a statesman’s task is to

persuade the public to adopt his position, it is best that he present it as persuasively as possible. Rhetoricians teach such speakers how to be persuasive. A Kantian might regard it a singular misfortune that his intellectual hero was so inept a writer, someone whose arguments are not especially persuasive except to those few readers with the patience to deal with his style. But there is a difference in kind between whether an account is persuasive and whether it is correct; a difference mirrored by the contrast between reading *Analytical Philosophy of Action* “as philosophy,” when we are concerned with its truth, and reading it “as literature,” if we desire that it have the virtues of literature. Recognizing, then, that there are literary aspects to philosophy is consistent with admitting that in the end we read philosophy differently from literature. It is desirable that a philosopher’s account be persuasive if his or her claims are true. But in the novel, since truth is not a concern, persuasiveness is ultimately all that we can seek.

In this way, style in philosophy is like the choice of examples a philosopher uses to illustrate his or her theorizing. Danto’s personality appears very often in his chosen examples, which often deal with family life and eroticism; his personality is as visible as his dogs (who make cameo appearances in recent essays) are omnipresent in his quotidian-Manhattan life. It would be very hard for someone who knows those books to imagine that their author is a woman. But that his examples are personal in this way does not show that therefore his conclusions also are. A person of a different sort, a woman who loved cats, would certainly employ different examples, but she might reach the same conclusions. Describing his life in the 1950s, Danto explains that his “relationship to the artworld was complicated by the fact that I also taught philosophy, though I sought to keep my two activities somewhat separate and to live in two worlds at once. I cannot pretend that it was comfortable to live so duplex a life.”²⁹ Perhaps that explains some features of his aesthetics, in ways Danto’s biographer might discuss, but it does not tell us whether his aesthetics is correct.

A deeper way of understanding the relationship between Danto’s personality and his philosophy, which is philosophically relevant, is to contrast the ways Cartesians, Hegelians, and Derridians think about such issues. The Cartesian philosopher discovers problems which could have been found by any able researcher, in the way that scientific discoveries or inventions could be made by someone other than the person whose name is attached to them. Our admiration for the person who made the discovery is undercut by the recognition that someone would have done it. If the Wright brothers had not invented the airplane, someone else would have, for its invention was inevitable. The Hegelian, by contrast, assigns a more privileged view to the individual who makes a discovery, since that discovery necessarily attaches to his or her name. A philosophical argument must be evaluated relative to its position in the history of that discipline. The Derridian, finally, treats the discovery in the way we speak of a novelist’s work. No one else could have written Austen’s or Spark’s novels not merely because “not all things are possible at all times,” but because these works are by these individuals. In so far as Danto holds a Cartesian view of the history of philosophy, his admiration for the individual philosopher must be limited. A philosopher is not a great creative personality, like a novelist or painter, but more akin to a scientist, someone who finds what is there, what any gifted person with persistence and skill can discover. A fine antidote to authorial narcissism, this analysis would permit us to

predict that Cartesians like Danto must lack a certain self-love of their writing in which Derridians are likely to indulge.

Obviously it is a further task to explain how the postmodern novel has very different goals from Austen, who would be astonished at the work of her heir Ivy Compton-Burnett. But when literary critics have explained that historical development within the novel, they have not told us how to understand the parallel structures in philosophy. The development of “philosophy writing” from Descartes through to his modern successors is a different story, for that activity has a different goal. Describing Danto as a stylish writer is certainly to praise him, but that is as limited a response to his philosophy as praising the woman giving the presidential address to the College Art Association for her attractive dress. That Danto is a skilled rhetorician is one of his virtues, but not one of his virtues as philosopher. Just as a wicked politician might be very good at persuading people to follow his disastrous policies, so too an eloquent philosopher might give the illusion of plausibility to quite fallacious arguments.

While this account says nothing about whether Danto’s arguments are ultimately to be judged true, it does show how his philosophical writings provide one way of judging the fashionable claims of the poststructuralists. What, to me at least, makes Danto seem so exotic a figure of the American philosophical establishment is that he possesses a philosophical system. Pre-modern philosophers had systems, as do continental philosophers, but analytic philosophers mostly do not. What is likely to provoke resistance to that system is that it runs counter to the prevailing dogmas of the age. What is surprising about the responses to his aesthetics is that few commentators take that system into account. My desire here has been to change the way his work is understood, making the system less exotic by showing how it does conflict with those dogmas. Danto the aesthetician is a far more interesting figure, I would claim, when we recognize that his view of aesthetics is part and parcel of this large framework. One reason that Danto’s philosophical system is of interest beyond the bounds of the world of analytic philosophy is that it suggests, in ways its creator has not to my knowledge spelled out, how philosophers within that tradition can think of the work of these colleagues who call themselves poststructuralists. This shows why his philosophical claims are important if they are true.

Notes

- 1 I attribute it to Derrida, but this position is perhaps better associated with Foucault; even if it be but my invention, it is an interesting position.
- 2 Danto, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York, 1975), p. ii.
- 3 See his *Mysticism and Morality. Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1987).
- 4 Danto, *Connections to the World* (New York, 1989).
- 5 See his “Munakata in New York: A Memory of the ’50s,” *New Observations*, 47, 1987, 3–10.
- 6 Danto’s theory of action, I should add, differs in one relevant way from his epistemology. That is a discipline which is Danto’s creation in large part. The literature he cites does not provide worked out precedents for his position, which does for philosophy of action what Descartes does for epistemology. But this I think may be merely a historical accident, for

Danto's intricately worked position does not depend upon modern discoveries of empirical science.

- 7 On Thucydides, see Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York, 1985), pp. 20–5.
- 8 Philosophers have often discussed such a view, which is presented, without mentioning Wittgenstein, in Rosalind Kraus's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," reprinted in her *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA, 1985). Given her allegiance elsewhere in the book to what she describes as poststructuralism, this quasi-Wittgensteinian account is puzzling.
- 9 When I speak of art I mean visual art, for music, literature, architecture, and the various other arts do not really enter into this analysis. Danto never suggests that their history is also ending, nor is there any obvious way to extend his analysis to these other arts.
- 10 For the art critic, Danto's account is a variation on a theme which in the 1980s was very familiar. Many critics of that era claimed that the history of painting had ended; see my *Artwriting* (Amherst, 1987), ch. 4. Like Danto, those critics were much influenced by Duchamp; unlike him, they offered no philosophical argument for their position. Danto could not but have been influenced by this view, but in so far as his analysis offers argumentation which art writers were characteristically unable to provide, noting this connection says nothing about the validity of his philosophical claims. My own view, very different from Danto's, is that Clement Greenberg was correct to observe that the whole Duchampian position was essentially anticipated by the eighteenth-century notion of the "aesthetic attitude." Once it was recognized that anything whatsoever could be a work of art if contemplated aesthetically, then presenting such objects as Duchamp's *Fountain* in the museum merely involved drawing the consequences of this Kantian position, though admittedly with examples which would have bewildered Kant.
- 11 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (New York, 1968), p. 131.
- 12 See Danto, *Connections*, p. 215; and Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978).
- 13 And just as well, for it is hard to think of a philosophy more out of fashion than Sartre's Marxism.
- 14 Descartes, "I have been greatly helped by considering machines," *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. E. Anscombe and P. Geach (Indianapolis, 1971), p. 236. Diderot imagined that a machine could paint works like Raphael, a more radical idea; Diderot, *Salons*, ed. J. Seznec (Oxford, 1983), vol. 3, p. 132.
- 15 I identify Danto as an analytic philosopher, but that glib characterization does not do justice to his position. His work is very much a product of the time when it became clear that "the missionary days of analytic philosophy" were over; *Connections*, p. 209. And yet, although he reads poststructuralism with infinitely greater sympathy (and knowledge of its background) than most analytic philosophers, he has never been even tempted to abandon the techniques of analytic philosophy.
- 16 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago, 1982), pp. 1–27, quotation 3.
- 17 This is an example like Danto's characteristic ones. If it is not a good translation of Derrida's claims, then it perhaps shows a real difference between Danto's claims about his indiscernibles and Derrida's account of "différence."
- 18 Wittgenstein's concerns, in both his late and early philosophy, with the self-reflexive nature of language, the way in which difficulties of producing a theory of representation also become problems in stating that theory in language, tend to be written off as part of his central European intellectual heritage.
- 19 One source of my interest in rhetoric is Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 7. For my unDantoesque account, see my *Principles of Art History Writing* (University Park, 1991).
- 20 Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 9.

- 21 Ibid., pp. 9–10. For further examples, see Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 128, and the list in *Connections*, pp. 6–8.
- 22 On frames, see Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago, 1987).
- 23 A minor problem, only a side issue, is that in fact these artifacts are not absolutely indistinguishable. (I owe this point to the art critic Carter Ratcliff.) Still they are distinguishable from merely utilitarian artifacts in ways that are aesthetically relevant.
- 24 See “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” in Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York, 1986).
- 25 This analysis echoes Nelson Goodman’s claim, which here survives Danto’s far-reaching critique of that aesthetic, that in an artwork any feature may be aesthetically relevant.
- 26 *La transfiguration du banal*, trans. C. Hary-Schaeffer (Paris, 1989).
- 27 *La transfiguration du banal*, pp. 57, 230, 285.
- 28 *Le bel âge de Miss Brodie*, trans. M. Paz (Paris, 1962).
- 29 “Munakata in New York,” p. 8.