

# Art, Artifacts, and Margolis’ Recovery of Objectivity

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**Abstract** Margolis aims for a ‘recovery of objectivity’. This may seem more suited to epistemologists or ethicists but Margolis saw reforming objectivity emerging from and contributing to his aesthetics and philosophy of art. My goal in this essay is to explain the connection of objectivity to aesthetics and then to offer some critical remarks which introduce an arguably richer version of objectivity, ‘pragmatic objectivity’. The introductory section explores Margolis’s motives for expanding aesthetics beyond its usual boundaries. Section 2 explores why artworks and selves are interdependent and artifactual, and how this prepares the ground for his recovery of objectivity. Section 3 considers Margolis’ more abstract, metaphysical context for objectivity, his modified relativism. At this point, Section 4 is able to lay out his revamped objectivity. Section 5 does the majority of this paper’s critical work: it explains why Margolis’ view might be considered a ‘pragmatic’ objectivity and advances some ways in which Margolis’ version might be filled in and extended. A brief conclusion identifies differences between the author’s and Margolis’ approach.

**Keywords** Margolis. Aesthetics. Philosophy of art. Objectivity. Pragmatic objectivity. Relativism. Dewey. Pragmatism.

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## 1 Introduction

In his 1841 essay "Art", Ralph Waldo Emerson explains that the artist's purpose is much grander than aesthetic form or expression. He writes,

There is higher work for Art than the arts....Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end. A man should find in it an outlet for his whole energy....Art should exhilarate, and throw down the walls of circumstance on every side, awakening in the beholder the same sense of universal relation and power which the work evinced in the artist, and its highest effect is to make new artists. (Emerson 2000, 280)

Emerson's ambition (for artists) is echoed in Joseph Margolis' philosophical writings about art. As he engages debates over the ontology or hermeneutics of artworks, he spins them out into wider accounts of the human condition. In this regard, he follows William James' example, pragmatically using, as Richard Shusterman noted "examples from aesthetics and art to formulate and defend his theories in other philosophical fields" (Shusterman 2011, 350).

So, in the spirit of James and Emerson, Margolis utilises art and aesthetics to project more magisterial theses – about the fallible nature of knowledge, our 'fluxive' reality, and the shifting, re-interpretable human condition. Sometimes, these wider ambitions are embedded in the job at hand – assessing the nature of a particular artwork or rejecting some critic's univocal interpretation. But if one sticks with Margolis, one can see that his targets for criticism are much more ambitious, extending out toward bivalent logics, invariant ontologies, and philosophy's indefensible penchant to isolate the aesthetic aspects of life from the wider human condition.

Margolis can be hard to follow, slippery; one moment he's discussing a specific artist or artwork (*Las Meninas* or Dante's *Commedia*, Warhol) and the next he is illuminating his point with comments on, say, bivalent logic or the self's artifactuality. One needs a handle to follow him; I suggest 'objectivity'.

Margolis aims for a 'recovery of objectivity'. This may seem more suited to epistemologists or ethicists but Margolis saw reforming objectivity emerging from and contributing to his aesthetics and philosophy of art. My goal in this essay is to explain the connection of objectivity to aesthetics and then to offer some critical remarks which introduce an arguably richer version of objectivity, 'pragmatic objectivity'.

The essay proceeds as follows. This introductory section explores Margolis's motives for expanding aesthetics beyond its usual boundaries. Section 2 explores why artworks and selves are interdependent and artifactual, and how this prepares the ground for his recovery of

objectivity. Section 3 considers Margolis' more abstract, metaphysical context for objectivity, his modified relativism. At this point, Section 4 is able to lay out his revamped objectivity. Section 5 does the majority of this paper's critical work; it explains why Margolis' view might be considered a 'pragmatic' objectivity and advances some ways in which Margolis' version might be filled in and extended. A brief conclusion sums up and identifies a difference between Margolis' approach and my own.

### 1.1 Expanding Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

One motive of Margolis' work is to rebut the limits placed upon aesthetics/philosophy of art. These areas remain of subordinate importance, fascinating in their way but not comparable to, say, ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. Margolis argues such subordination is indefensible for multiple reasons, one being that it is impossible to *do* philosophy of art without *also* engaging the other 'big' questions.

The conceptual space occupied by the philosophy of art is hardly more than a small neighborhood within the continent of human culture: it cannot be analysed separately from the rest of that huge world. (Margolis 2008, xiii)

This becomes quickly evinced by the difficulties encountered when trying to assess the ontology of artworks:

[T]o admit the ontic peculiarity of artworks and other cultural entities... is to challenge in an ineluctable way the entire western conception of objective knowledge in independent reality. (Margolis 1999, 39)

The best response to the metaphysical queerness of artworks is to stop trying to shoehorning them into exhausted and implausible ontic frameworks (which he collects as 'invariant').<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is better to see

how essential it is to the theory of art to fashion a conception of reality that indissolubly unites the analysis of physical nature and the analysis of human culture. (Margolis 2008, iv)

This is a big lift, he realises, but a necessary one, and he chides various theorists of art (e.g. Arthur Danto, Monroe Beardsley) for pushing fatally flawed theories rather than changing larger and deeper assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup> On Margolis' use of 'invariantism' see, e.g., his *Historied Thought, Constructed World* (1995), Chapter 2, and throughout, as well as his *What, After All, Is a Work of Art* (1999).

We cannot say what is real in the world (including artworks) if we have no right to claim to know such matters for a fact; and we cannot know what we claim is true about the world if the world is not as we claim it is. (Margolis 2008, 87)

## 1.2 Meliorism and the Human Condition

A more important motive for Margolis regards the human condition. In the Preface to *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?*, Margolis connects the importance of art with its relationship to the human self.

Art is one of the principal activities by which we make our alien world familiar and interpretatively secure. (Margolis 1999, x)

Given that fact, the question organising this (and other) books is to understand the

sense in which artworks and human selves mutually inform the work of interpreting and understanding one another. (Margolis 1999, ix)

Why is this important? One might say the stakes are existential as they involve our need to answer

the threat of the overwhelming isolation of the life of reflexive consciousness (and meaning) that belongs exclusively to human persons. (ix-x)

This existential question - the quality of our very lives - becomes clearer once one learns that both art and selves are culturally fashioned 'artifacts', made and remade over time. Moreover, the artifacts we make (movies, histories, novels, buildings, technologies, etc.), in turn, make us. These interdependencies are complex, of course, but they also extend to more conceptual ('meta') levels, including those involving interpretation and evaluation.

Having argued that philosophy no longer has the burden of showing how artworks and selves are discovered (or given by reality), Margolis describes the task taking the older one's place. Namely, to describe how and why they are mutually constitutive and reinterpretable. No longer trying to fix or prescribe what a 'self' or 'artwork' is, philosophy tries to open up richer veins of interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is somewhat reminiscent of Richard Rorty's objectives (e.g. in "Solidarity or Objectivity") where he argued that by annulling the goal of any ultimate form of objectivity, the horizon for freedom of creativity and conversation expands, all the while strengthening the possibilities for solidarity.

### 1.3 Against Prescription, Against Modern and Postmodern Takes on Art

What Margolis opposes, then, are winnowing operations, programs of metaphysical *prescription* – of ultimate or ideal natures, definitions, methods, systems, logics, etc. He articulates, and proselytizes against, the invariant or ‘modern’ standpoint which infects too much of our theoretical and everyday understandings of the world.

I take modernity to be no more and no less than the human condition: the temptation...to believe that the contingent formation of our cognitive powers do not subvert the right to be assured that we perceive the human as well as the natural world in a confirmably neutral way. (Margolis 1999, 5)

This ontic worldview – that there is a singular and ultimately real world, unchanging in fundamental ways, discoverable by reason, etc. – is not only incorrect, but dangerous. It is dangerous for pragmatic reasons – whichever version is proposed becomes an *idée fixe* that hobbles creativity or reinterpretation. Beyond pointing out those views’ logical dead-ends, Margolis provides an alternative – his own version of relativism. Again, this relativism is not only more plausible, it is less *dangerous*.

Relativism is not inherently a subversive doctrine, a way of destroying the fabric of decent society. It is, rather, the upshot of a quite sober reckoning of the false pretensions of a canon that might well wreck us with its own misguided zeal. (Margolis 1999, 61)

It’s important, however, to note that Margolis avoids the postmodernist/Rortyan option. Why? Because that approach, he writes,

simply abandons at a stroke the entire need for a justification of practices....But this is simply intellectual bankruptcy. For one thing, we cannot eliminate...constative discourse. For another, the practice – any practice, the practice of any community of inquirers – must have a rationale regarding how to go on to new cases not included in the paradigms learned in learning the original language or practice. Therein lies...the defect and defeat of the postmodernist maneuver. For the problem is not merely one of how to go on extending the scope of complex predicates in new circumstances but also one of how to go on giving rational or critical redirection to any sustained and disciplined inquiry. (Margolis 2001, 31)

## 1.4 The Recovery of Objectivity

How do we get out of this dilemma – the straitjacket of invariantism or the mirror house of postmodernism? How can we gain traction in our accounts about art, selves, and the relations between them? One important idea Margolis proposes is the recovery of 'objectivity', and the arts hold the key:

The arts, I am convinced may be shown to provide a better clue than the usual accounts of the natural sciences about how, for instance, to recover "objectivity" at the end of the century. (Margolis 1999, 3)

This would not be a replay of the older version of objectivity – which ties truth to something (e.g. reality) transcending it. Nor would it yield postmodernist excesses since

we obviously need some normative sense of the rigor of inquiry and the attribution of truth-values. Whatever is best in that sense is what we must recover as objectivity. (Margolis 1999, 58)

As will be evident in coming sections, Margolis' objectivity will serve various areas of human endeavor; our focus will be upon how to legitimate discourses about the ontology and interpretation of artworks and selves.

## 2 The Artifactual and Interactive Nature of Artworks and Selves

Margolis' recovery (or reconstruction) of objectivity faces historical obstacles. He cannot merely tinker with traditional objectivity, as it is encumbered by an invariantist framework he finds incoherent. And, within the network of so-called postmodernist approaches, there is little expressed desire or need for objectivity. A third way to recover objectivity must be found.

Margolis builds that third way by his analyses of three things: (a) the 'intentional' properties which help explain and identify artworks; (b) extension of those properties to human selves and their co-constitutive relationship with artifacts (such as artworks); and finally, (c) the labile and reinterpretable nature of these artifacts. These three analyses create a context in which his new objectivity makes sense, one I later argue is better construed as 'pragmatic'. Let's take a look at these analyses in turn.

## 2.1 'Intentional' Properties

Spending decades debating ontological and hermeneutic questions about artworks showed Margolis that a different characterisation of these artifacts was needed.

A lot of mischief lies buried in the elementary blunder of conflating the physical and "aesthetic" features of an artwork. (Margolis 1999, 106)

What, then, are we noticing when we experience an artwork? The answer, he says, is captured by what he names 'Intentional properties'.

By "Intentional" I mean "cultural"...in the straightforward sense of designating something as possessing meaning of significative or semiotic structure, in accord with the collective experience of a particular historical society. (Margolis 1999, 92)

These Intentional properties are culturally relative, they are

expressive, representational, stylistic, rhetorical, symbolic, semi-otic, linguistic, traditional, institutional, and otherwise significative features. (Margolis 1999, 62)

When we perceive and grasp artworks, he explains, we do so in a way that is distinct from our encounters with common physical things:

The perception of an artwork is, first of all, the perception of an entity that cannot be identified by whatever minimal means serve to identify a physical object or "mere real thing", for the one possesses and the other lacks Intentional properties; and, second, in perceiving artworks, we do perceive them as possessing Intentional properties. (Margolis 1999, 37)

Remember that Margolis' characterisation of encounters with artifacts is not only a variation of how we would characterise normal practice; rather, it is radical advocacy for a different ontic view altogether. What's more, the epistemic approach which results also differs from those which usually accompany standard invariant accounts. Crucial to Margolis is that we see that

Intentional properties...cannot be determined criterially, algorithmically, evidentially, except in ways that are already subaltern to the consensual (not criterial) tolerance of the apt agents of the collective practices of a particular society. (Margolis 1999, 62)<sup>3</sup>

In sum, then, the traditional problem of identifying (and interpreting) artworks is mitigated by identifying a different kind of property constituting such artifacts while also explaining how typical tasks (individuation, identification, evaluation) now work within a different, relativistic framework. What's more, the relationship between the epistemic and the ontic changes; what is ontic is no longer fundamental but instead is codependent with the epistemic. (This conception of the epistemic, it should be said, erases hard divides between 'reason' and 'emotion'.)

## 2.2 Intentionalising

The other important aspect of Intentional properties concerns the active role of agents; we don't wait to be impinged upon by properties radically outside us, as in modern theories of vision, say. Rather,

we Intentionalise the world, not merely by piling artifact on artifact but by creating and deciphering the interpretively reflexive (the endlessly reinterpreted) history of that same undertaking. (Margolis 1999, 126)

Human beings are makers, not spectators, of their ontic environment. There is a dialectic between, as Dewey might put it, 'doing' and 'undergoing'.

## 2.3 Artworks and Selves

Having reclassified artworks as artifacts comprised by Intentional properties, Margolis extends such artifactuality to human selves.

Human beings...are formed and transformed in the same way artworks are, are altered by their ambient art world as well as by their technologies; thus altered, humans shape and reshape (in turn) the arts, technologies, and histories of their own culture. (Margolis 1999, 103)

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**3** Notice that once this is understood, standard puzzles about definition dissolve. "It's almost never the definition that matters", Margolis writes, "it's more likely to be one or another contested theory about the arts that a would-be definition serves to focus in a certain felicitous and systematic way" (Margolis 1999, 68).



The picture here is not unlike the Peircean world of signs or the Rortyan space of ongoing conversation. Meanings are in constant motion, created and recreated, amidst shifting circumstances. Selves are 'uttered' by the same processes as artworks:

we may think of selves as themselves "uttered" by the enculturating processes of their home societies. Then artworks, like sentences, may be thought of as the nominalised, relatively independent, detachable precipitates of that same process. (Margolis 1999, 126)

Selves formed in these ways are more interrelated and less atomic than in previous ontic schemas. This, too, is a lesson from Margolis' aesthetics.

We ourselves count as discrete physical entities only when counted as members of *Homo sapiens*; as encultured selves, we are linked to one another by sharing a collective culture and Intentional history in ways that appear (to us) to override biology. (Margolis 1999, 97)

What's more, the way we become selves (via this 'uttering' process) is inseparable from our interpretations and evaluations of our artworks.

All of the arts are the constructed utterances of an enabling age: we study ourselves in studying the arts, and we are thereby continually altered in the sensibilities with which we continue to do so. (Margolis 1999, 124)

For this reason, then, the analysis of artworks and of human beings is of a piece, inseparable:

The similarities between selves and artworks lies in their sharing Intentional structure, not in their material embodiment. For, of course, what they share is the unity of expression and expressive agency....No theory of the arts...is likely to be convincing if it is not a theory about what it is to be a human being or what human beings draw from the arts. (Margolis 1999, 137, 102)

## 2.4 Reinterpretability and Determinacy

The third element in Margolis' picture (of artworks, selves, and their interrelationship) regards their 'labile' and 'reinterpretable' nature. Unlike physical objects or those populating the invariant picture Margolis rejects, artifacts in his schema have an "existence and nature [that] are emergent in a *sui generis* way" and this means that "their objective specificities are interpretively labile in ways that are not

found anywhere else in nature". (Margolis 1999, 132) This is true not only of artworks and selves, but of our other constructions, such as history.

The meaning of the past is characteristically projected (and continually redefined) from our changing understanding of our own present. (Margolis 1999, 135)

Implied by these facts is the need for a new explanation regarding how these changing, encultured 'utterances' gain fixity or determinacy, even for a brief while – some way that utterances don't melt away in a postmodern play of signs. The answer to this challenge must involve situated and local determinacies, not ultimate ones.

I hold...that Intentional attributes are inherently open-ended and determinable and that interpretative determinacy holds provisionally, only within a historicised consensus. What holds for artworks holds for selves as well, and vice versa. (Margolis 1999, 133)

In sum, Margolis has put in place an account of artworks, selves, and the Intentional properties which characterise them. He gestures at the metaphysical context as well as the need for epistemic determinacy, albeit limited. This brings us to his relativism and what it enables, the recovery of objectivity.

### **3 Relativism and the Recovery of Objectivity**

#### **3.1 Setting Realism, Ontic Fixity, Aside**

Among the lessons Margolis takes from the standard puzzles about artworks' ontology and interpretation is the need for a change of metaphysical framework. One simply cannot make useful (and coherent) sense of artworks within the realist/invariantist metaphysical picture.

I doubt there is any single way to understand the history of art, any more than there is a unique way to understand what it is to be a human person. In fact, the two are ultimately one and the same achievement. We ourselves, I should say, are "artifacts" of cultural history: "second-natured" selves. (Margolis 1999, 35)

Given artworks and selves share an artifactual nature, Margolis entreats us to admit the hopelessness of realist arguments. Against Aristotle's objection to relativism, for example – which argued that denying bivalence produces instant self-contradiction – Margolis counters that this argument

depends not on bivalence itself but on the modal fixity of reality... [and yet] Aristotle nowhere secures that fixity; at no point does he demonstrate that ontic fixity cannot be coherently denied. *No one has ever shown that, for it cannot be done.* (Margolis 1999, 72; emphasis in the original)

Once it is clear that there is no good reason to adopt ontic realism (presupposing "a relative fixity of nature"), it follows that other readings relying on realism (of artworks, of human selves) also fall by the wayside. There is, he writes,

no principled ground...on which to disjoin the realist reading of human selves and the realist reading of the artifacts of their world; both are culturally constituted in similar ways and subject to similar interpretive interests... [A]rt-works, like human selves, are better thought of as histories - Intentionally structured careers deployed over time as individuated entities. (Margolis 1999, 35, 90)

The lesson he draws from this is overtly pragmatic:

Whatever advantages accrue to bivalence or relativism depend entirely on our picture of the world in which they apply. Even that is a stunning gain. (Margolis 1999, 51)

### 3.2 Cultural Variability and Relativity

Whether one is assessing artworks over time or across cultures, there is a recurrent need to account for circumstance, viz., cultural relativity or variability. He writes,

By "cultural relativity", then, I mean no more than the pedestrian fact that the different societies have different histories, languages, customs, values, theories, and the like. (Margolis 1999, 53)

Again, this carries us beyond artworks to culture-at-large. For Margolis, any project aimed at evaluating artifacts (possessing Intentional properties) necessarily engages things with the "expressive, representational, stylistic, rhetorical, symbolic, semiotic, linguistic, traditional, institutional, and otherwise significant features of artworks" (Margolis 1999, 53, 55). The same kind of relativism applies both across cultures and within the subcultures of a complex society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Margolis writes, "What is potentially interesting about cultural relativity is that the differences noted between cultures may also obtain within them - that inter-societal differences are no different in any principled way from intrasocietal differences; there-

Regarding Margolis' larger brief against myopic presentations of relativism, I lack the space here to summarise his extensive body of work; that includes accounts of different varieties of relativism and the various ways philosophers have condensed a rich panoply of relativisms into a few pathetically indefensible versions to be incinerated and swept aside. These maneuvers indicate to Margolis that what is at stake is larger – a 'cultural site' for work to be done:

[T]he modern discussions are not so much arguments one way or another as unavoidable confirmations of the kind of cultural site at which the threat of relativism must be met... I am convinced that the ancient and modern ways of rejecting relativism depend on the same unearned conviction, namely, that whatever is truly real possesses some unchangeable structure. (Margolis 1999, 43)

### 3.3 Relativism Neither Dangerous Nor Lacking 'Rigor'

Relativism, as Margolis presents it, is neither dangerous (to knowledge or normativity), nor amenable to criterial or algorithmic determinations of entity identity or interpretation; moreover, it does not set itself beyond situated practices. This last point is significant because not only does it blunt realism-cum-invariantism, it blunts any postmodern appropriations which portray artifacts as so labile in nature or meaning that they would be immune to local norms or limits.

Margolis was familiar with attacks on his system as lacking 'rigor' or grounding. Margolis responded by arguing that 'rigor' is more properly understood as driven by the demands made by actual objects (artifacts, such as artworks); rigor is called for, also, because of the complete failure of philosophical aesthetics to determine any single, definitive interpretations. He writes,

the switch from bivalence to relativistic values is not a change in rigor at all but a change in what we understand to be the nature of the *objects* on which the relevant rigor is to be practiced... [T]here is no obvious way in which relying on authorial or artistic intent, textual meaning, historical ethos, genre, syntax, biography, context, rules or practices of interpretation, canons, or anything of the kind could possibly force us to accept the unique-interpretation thesis. (Margolis 1999, 58; 2008, 83; emphasis in the original)

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fore, it is just as philosophically difficult to fix objective truth and knowledge within one in any one society or culture as it is between very different societies or cultures" (Margolis 1999, 54).

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Indeed, if 'rigor' is the metric by which an approach might be judged, Margolis would likely argue that greater rigor is demanded of his theory. Why? Because relativism is a theory which both (a) accepts demands placed by *the objects* on the theories and (b) accepts the need to test theories by their applicability to a practical (and wider) world. Writing about that latter test (of application beyond art objects) Margolis writes,

Rightly perceived, these notions invite us to consider whether the rest of the real world might not also be advantageously construed in its [an artwork's] terms. I confess I am persuaded that it might, and would. In that case, the master theme is *flux*: not chaos or the denial of intelligible structure but the denial that any and all discerned structures - *de re, de dicto, de cognitione* - cannot but be invariant or necessarily inviolable, on pain of incoherence or self-contradiction. (Margolis 1999, 86; emphasis in the original)

## 4 Recovering Objectivity

### 4.1 Toward Objectivity

To briefly review, Margolis has been seeking to recover objectivity, to reconstruct it in a way that will provide useful fixities serviceable to understanding artifacts' nature and interpretations - especially artworks and selves. (Such inquiries ultimately press toward self-understanding or wisdom.) Via experiences and analyses of artworks, Margolis notices many theories foundering on mistaken ontic pictures of reality, and concomitant epistemological assumptions borne from them. His remedy is to demonstrate why such pictures are incoherent, and then propose his own account of reality (as fluxive) and truth (as relativistic). Relativism is, he argues, not only defensible, but the most reasonable and pragmatic route toward the aforementioned goals. As I'll develop in a bit, Margolis' approach is strongly 'pragmatic', though he avoids that label. I'll argue Margolis' approach would benefit from a more fulsome embrace of the adjective and his objectivity could be improved and more forthrightly entitled 'pragmatic objectivity'. I'll get to this, soon.

## 4.2 Objectivity Neither Rigid Nor Aimless

First, let's consider objectivity as Margolis advances it. He is seeking a via media to avoid the dogmatic inflexibility of realism and the adventitious whimsy of postmodernism, a way of 'fixing belief', as C.S. Peirce would put it. He finds that via media in virtue of the demands placed upon interpretive theories by the exigencies of practice. He writes,

[P]ractice cannot be so labile that it outruns the fluencies of memory and reasonable expectation, but it also cannot be so inflexible that experienced history is prevented from continually adjusting our critical resources to the latest in interpretive fashion. We move safely enough between these extremes, and neither science nor interpretive criticism needs anything more demanding.... Interpretation may be as local, tendentious, opportunistic, free-wheeling, and idiosyncratic as you please. Or, it may have pretensions of a connoisseur's authority. But I cannot see any reason to choose between such options. (Margolis 1999, 98)

## 4.3 Objectivity as Constructed Norm

The alternative to accepting either option is to insist on objectivity's constructed nature. As you'll recall, standard approaches to definition lead to failures and dead ends in understanding artworks. Margolis proposed Intentional properties as a better approach, and expanded this proposal beyond artworks to selves and the artifactual world at large. As Margolis describes the stratagem:

To admit the constructed and historicised nature of the Intentional world makes it impossible to view objectivity in cultural matters as anything but a constructed norm subject to indefinitely extended, historicised revisions. Cultural understanding is essentially a society's self-understanding...formed under the conditions of radical history by creatures who are themselves precipitates of that same process. (Margolis 2008, 94)

Significantly, Margolis' point about cultural phenomena also applies to supposedly hard distinctions in perception – e.g., between what is 'given' and what we 'take away'. Arguing for the constructed nature of such distinctions, Margolis writes,

[W]e must always distinguish what we suppose is "given" to our sensory apparatus and what is "given" phenomenologically as what we are prepared to report we see; and... [notice] that an objective account of that distinction is never more than a construction...that

fits the holist life of human agents and, inferentially, the life of creatures that cannot report what it is they see. (Margolis 2008, 32-3)

What this means, then, is that objectivity is

no more than a provisional artifact that we may alter and revise unendingly (as we see fit) in accord with whatever...we take our executive interests to be. (Margolis 1999, 6)<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.4      **Objection: Constructed Objectivity Leads to a Vicious Regress**

Some comment that objectivity cannot be 'constructed' or localised in these ways because they lead to a regress. If there are no fixed standards by which to judge any particular constructed objectivity norm, it simply cannot function as a norm! Margolis sidesteps this worry by connecting it to the presumption (conscious or unconscious) that the invariantist ontic view must be correct. (This was the point he made against Aristotle, mentioned earlier). In actual life, he insists, the fact that our ideas, norms, artworks, and selves, are reconstruct-able has not posed a problem.

[O]bjectivity is constructed and endlessly reconstructed in the flux of history; that it has always been so (though misrepresented); and that, to the extent it is so, our science and art criticism (among other undertakings) have never really suffered for it. (Margolis 1999, 13)

Perhaps equally true, too, is that artworks are *especially* immune to the realist objection. Why? Because, as Dewey pointed out, art often presages, spurs, exhorts change between milieus or periods in social life; thus, it cannot be judged 'objectively' - either by eras on the way out or on the way in. Whether acting as provocateur or Cassandra, art is a midwife of cultural change and so can never be 'objectively' judged by existing standards or norms. Such artworks are liminal.

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<sup>5</sup> The same goes, of course, for whatever is consider the 'objectively real world', too. That notion is also a 'posit': "[S]een from the experiential and epistemic side (under that constraint), the real world is, effectively, also 'constructed' - though (as in the physical sciences) it is entirely possible (and coherent) to form a picture (within its terms) of a physical world 'independent' of our cognising conditions. That is to say, the ontic independence of the physical world is, by a benign antinomy, a posit internal to our epistemic competence" (Margolis 1999, 121).

That said, I must admit to having trouble reconciling another statement Margolis makes, namely his claim that "although physical nature is (doubtless) ontically prior to human culture, the cultural world is (in its turn) epistemically prior to the physical" (Margolis 1999, 96). I cannot square the notion that something is 'ontically prior' with his other claim, namely that the "ontic independence of the physical world" is a posit.

Finally, Margolis defends his relativistic objectivity by noting the process by which it can, and must, become 'stable' as he puts it. This occurs without needing any anchor to reality-as-such.

We cannot claim to interpret a life or artwork objectively unless we can isolate a relatively stable part of our encompassing cultural world as pertinent to that undertaking. There can be no uniquely adequate or appropriate milieu relative to which alone any life or artwork can be objectively interpreted. Whatever interpretive work is deemed objective becomes, for that reason, a salient part of the encompassing ethos from which further interpretive possibilities may be drawn and pertinently weighted. (Margolis 1999, 137)

In the course of cultural discourse, what becomes stable is taken as 'normal'. Eventually, 'normal' gives way, over time to a 'new normal' and, he writes, "suitably informed persons may claim to discern those [Intentional] properties and interpret them objectively" (Margolis 1999, 55).

Thus, on Margolis' account, whatever we now count as normal, stable, or objective has emerged due to their attributed Intentional properties (which are contingent culturally, historically, etc.). This means that the very logic appropriate to interpretation will be, in effect, indexed to relativistic objectivity norms.

[W]hat the appropriate logic should be, in servicing, say, the interpretation of the arts, will be a function of what we take the objective features of the art to be. (Margolis 1999, 45)

## 5 Pragmatic Objectivity

We have seen how much Margolis' objectivity varies from traditional notions. Margolis' norms are made, not found; they are relative to history, culture, and circumstance, not timeless. Objectivity ranges, defeasibly, over the properties Margolis calls Intentional. Recognising objectivity's constructed nature and inquiring into it, we find ourselves heeding the oldest philosophical directive, 'Know thyself'.

In the spirit of friendly amendment, I would like to make the case that Margolis' version of objectivity would be better termed 'pragmatic objectivity'. This is not a common phrase, however, and Margolis, as far as I can tell, does not use it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Recent philosophical works utilising and developing this specific technical term include Hildebrand 2011a; 2011b; and Frega 2014. Stephen Ward, a professor of journal-



But there are many ways in which his recovery is informed by pragmatic rationales. For example, the parameters shaping what will count as 'objectivity' are provided pragmatically, amidst what Margolis refers to using his understanding of Hegel's term *sittlich*, "the actual practices of a society of apt speakers" (Margolis 1999, 64). Such practices would of course be informed by and directed toward extant values or purposes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, truth claims would depend upon what we claim are our best first-order interests in this domain or that and a pragmatic logic (Margolis 1999, 59, 96).<sup>8</sup>

Regarding that pragmatic logic, he writes,

[L]ogic and metaphysics of entities is often a matter of quite local conceptual carpentry – even *bricolage*. Certainly it need have no invariantist pretensions: it merely follows the developing needs of evolving experience and tries to shape new conceptual habits that will serve us for a useful interval. (Margolis 1999, 96)

The elements of that logic will be formed by exigencies of context, dictated by "the developing needs of evolving experience" and trying "to shape new conceptual habits that will serve us for a useful interval" (Margolis 1999, 96).<sup>9</sup>

All of this takes place, mind you, within what he refers to as "the holist life of human agents", (Margolis 2008, 33), or what we might simply call a practical or pragmatic starting point. From that starting point (the "cognising conditions" of the *sittlich*), what amounts to an instrumentalist account of reality (including physical reality) is concocted.

Perhaps the most pragmatic element of all in Margolis' objectivity is his constant return of focus to the *process* of inquiry (rather than the criteria of truth).

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ism has utilised the term extensively, beginning at least as far back as 2004, and that is where I first picked it up.

**7** Such pragmatic forces range over more than artworks, but any technology, broadly construed. "Every "technology", Margolis write, "is, if viable, infused with the *sittlich* values of the historical society that uses it... [and those technologies' possibilities are gradually and creatively constructed] as we transform ourselves by the labor of mastering its evolving possibilities" (Margolis 1999, 116).

**8** Margolis write, "[W]hat counts as objectivity is – ineluctably – a recent artifact of how we choose to discipline our truth-claims in any sector of inquiry. The assumption is that there is simply no way to *discover* the true norms of objectivity in any domain at all. Acceptable norms will have to be constructed as one or another disputed second-order proposal for it to what we claim are our best first-order interests in this domain or that" (Margolis 1999, 59).

**9** Objectivity, as it pertains to logic, is a thoroughgoing, pragmatic affair: "[W]hat holds for predication holds for reference and denotation and for all linguistic powers that bear on servicing truth-claims" (Margolis 1999, 63).

How, we wonder, should we be guided in science or literary interpretation? The minimal answer is plain enough: we must begin with the socially entrenched practices of the various inquiries that we habitually pursue, shorn (if possible) of the pretensions of invariantist philosophies....[I]t is not a question of the meaning or criteria of "true" at all but of how, socially, the practices of what we call objective inquiry are first formed. (Margolis 1999, 87, 59)

### 5.1 Frega on Pragmatic Objectivity in Dewey and Margolis

So far, I've indicated several genuine consonances between Margolis' view of objectivity and what some call 'pragmatic objectivity'. At this point, I wish to become a bit more specific by looking at Roberto Frega's recommendation of pragmatic objectivity in aesthetics, especially as it connects to both Dewey and Margolis.

In "Pragmatic Objectivity and the Grounds of Validity of Aesthetic Judgments" (2014), Frega details how Dewey and Margolis deploy a pragmatic form of objectivity capable of justifying aesthetic judgments. Noting some deficiencies in both of their versions, he concludes with his own version which, he suggests, might supersede theirs. Frega's piece is worth a careful read; for my purposes, I need only focus on a few issues raised.

As Frega tells it, Dewey's 'pragmatic objectivity' integrates two different and opposed approaches to justifying aesthetic judgment. On the one hand, we judge artworks based on 'funded sources', that is, what we already know and have experienced. On the other hand, the impression works make upon us is also significant for judgment. We seek out art which delivers fresh, exciting, and novel experiences; whether we get it or not bears on our aesthetic judgment.

These two approaches (the 'judiciary' and the 'impressionist') are in tension; the challenge is how to combine them. Dewey accomplishes this, Frega argues, by explaining how both artists and appreciators have 'problems' to solve in their aesthetic experiences. Artists, for their part, need to solve the problem of expression (concepts, feelings, e.g.) in a way that communicates (or just connects) effectively with an audience.<sup>10</sup>

Appreciators, too, have a problem to solve, one different from the artist if nevertheless coordinate with her's. Presented with a new experience, it is often not immediately apparent how to 'take' it - how to make meaning out of it, and even how to resolve perceptual ambiguities.

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<sup>10</sup> The artist's problem, as Dewey put it, was to confront the "difficulties to be overcome in bringing about the proper reciprocal adaptation of parts" in artistic production (see Dewey 1934, 143; quoted in Frega 2014, 51).

The commonality, Frega remarks, is the experimental, problem-solving process both artist and appreciator must undergo. This means seeking a kind of objectivity rooted not in abstract reality but in concrete contingencies (time, place, history, purposes, and feelings) – a *pragmatic* objectivity. Frega writes,

The claim to objectivity of aesthetic criticism is therefore embedded in the restricted space of a controlled pluralism. (Frega 2014, 52)

Not only does this prevent funded or past resources from dominating judgment, it also delimits the impressionistic appreciator from overestimating the import of the moment. Immediate experiences with works must, Frega writes, “be tempered by its inclusion in a natural history of the form”. (Frega 2014, 53)

The overlap between Dewey’s approach and Margolis’ is clear; it includes the fact that innovation in the arts is only accomplished when the artist solves the problem of drawing upon (possibly inchoate) feelings and ideas and expressing them in novel ways conditioned by “the socio-historical and technical-expressive conditions of experience in his time” (Frega 2014, 53). Criticism which incorporates sensitivity to this tension – between the expressive act and the socio-historical-technical constraints – is pragmatically objective.

Margolis’ approach, Frega argues, adds to and expands Dewey’s pragmatic objectivity in aesthetic criticism. It’s needed because much contemporary art exceeds what Dewey’s theory could accommodate; bluntly, some art is just too wild, random, conceptual for Dewey; his theory cannot handle it – and yet it is art.

How does Margolis’ view help? Margolis rejects either ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ approaches to criticism. The moderns seek invariance – definitions of art’s essential nature or standards for quality (or beauty) rooted in the ontically invariant (a view, we saw, he thinks is refuted on metaphysical grounds). Postmodern approaches abandon too many constraints and, so, both the art entity and standards of criticism are lost to entropy. Thus, Margolis provides a useful third option, Frega argues, by insisting (as we saw earlier) that

Objectivity is not something imposed upon criticism from outside, but a property displayed by our practices. Aesthetic criticism proves in practice its normative potential without this requiring... “any ‘a priori’ notion of objectivity”. (Frega 2014, 54)

To repeat a point made earlier, objectivity is a local affair. Like a child’s playground game, there are rules, but they are contextual to time, place, people, and purposes. They are relativistic but not in an ‘anything goes’ way. In Margolis’ version of relativism, Frega writes,

there is no need for...a meta-theory of objectivity: objectivity is something that is produced within social practices, according to the normative criteria these practices develop in the course of time. (Frega 2014, 55)

I will not pursue the details of Frega's fine article any further, here. (He goes on to offer a third option which he calls the "Dewey-Margolis thesis of interpretive objectivity".) Instead, I want to broaden the discussion to my own conception of 'pragmatic objectivity' to add or adjust elements not mentioned by either Frega or Margolis.

## 5.2 Hildebrand on Pragmatic Objectivity in Dewey and Margolis

At the start of this section I indicated ways in which Margolis' account is 'pragmatic'. These included how *sittlich* factors shape potential forms of objectivity, the interest-driven nature of truth claims, the embedding of objectivity in the 'holist' life of agents, and the pragmatic logic governing claims, definitions, etc. In addition to this shared ground between Dewey and Margolis, we can add their common rebuke of absolutism (i.e., realism, invariantism) or extreme relativism (i.e., postmodernism). Neither approach provides effective epistemic means for dealing with artworks, selves, or much more. Moreover, they agree that the special standpoint required by either extreme is incoherent. Margolis would surely agree with Dewey's antirealist statement that

One can only see from a certain standpoint, but this fact does not make all standpoints of equal value. A standpoint which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity. (Dewey 1931, 14-15)

He would also have agreed with Dewey's rejection at the argument that the very existence of perspectives implied their proliferation without limit. This can be rejected on the empirical basis that, as Dewey argues, even among the most diverse perspectives "the same predicaments of life recur" (Dewey 1916, 337).

The most important core to pragmatic objectivity is overt and prominent in Dewey but lack mention or emphasis in Margolis. Margolis' view could be enhanced by folding in Deweyan ideas he tends to avoid, such as 'experience', and what I call a practical starting point. I propose these not merely because I favor them (though I do) but because the incorporation of experience provides existential traction which could advance Margolis' stated cause of reducing "the overwhelming isolation of the life of reflexive consciousness" (Margolis 1999, ix). Experience keeps theory connected to practice, and to life.

Margolis is very comfortable dealing with issues from stratospheric heights – in ‘isms’ and over vast historical sweeps. None of this compromises his arguments, necessarily, but when one reads Dewey’s careful transformation of objectivity, one sees him locate where the devil is in the details. For example, he recognises that the deployment of terms like ‘objective’ are ways of taking stands that have an impact on inquiry. If one is going to intervene with a different account of objectivity – a ‘pragmatic’ or ‘recovered’ one – then understanding the *rhetorical* context of a particular use of objectivity is paramount. One must appreciate the particulars of the actual community in which this dialogue will take place; for example, it is a much different matter to propose modifications in objectivity talk among, say, physicists than among novelists.

Appreciation of those circumstances means inquiring into the motivations behind instances of objectivity talk. People claim objectivity to serve various practical, even emotional needs. Some seek ‘the’ objective truth because they need closure (for some further practical or psychological reason); appreciating that can help modulate how any new version of objectivity is to be explained and used in that arena. Alternately, others who vehemently reject objectivity (call them old-school relativists) may have *other* practical needs – for example, to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives (again for further reasons which require inquiry).

The challenge, then, for any new conception of objectivity is to incorporate an appreciation of the perspectives and values involved in sites where ‘objectivity’ has currency. Margolis might think his inclusion of *sittlich* satisfies this challenge, and broadly it does, but I believe that proof-of-concept for his recovered objectivity would be greatly assisted by further details.

To understand why objectivity is pragmatic for Dewey we need to consider that being objective means fulfilling an obligation to conduct inquiry in a certain way. One must exemplify those epistemic habits which contribute to productive inquiry. For example, consider someone investigating an incident of theft. They want to know ‘what really happened’. This goal, to find out what ‘really happened’ is the assumption, Dewey writes, of

a valuable methodological canon [because it is] interpreted as a warning to avoid prejudice, to struggle for the greatest possible amount of objectivity and impartiality, and as an exhortation to exercise caution and skepticism in determining the authenticity of material proposed as potential data. (Dewey 1938, 236)

Again, nothing here would provoke Margolis’ disagreement. But while Margolis states that the main locus of objectivity is in practices (fallible, situated, improvisatory) Dewey does more legwork in

detailing how objectivity functions (pragmatically) to regulate the process of inquiry. Indeed, objectivity for Dewey just means valuing features of inquiry likely to resolve problematic situations:

To be "objective" in thinking is to have a certain sort of selective interest operative... One may have affection for a standpoint which gives a rich and ordered landscape rather than for one from which things are seen confusedly and meagerly. (Dewey 1931, 14-15)

The most important difference between Margolis and Dewey regarding what provides traction to objectivity is 'experience'. Margolis mentions experience in some of his accounts of objectivity, but only in a casual, passing way; it is rarely in his books' indices (unless it is under scrutiny for other reasons). But, for Dewey, experience is crucial to why objectivity can have teeth in inquiry. Let's explore briefly why.

We have seen pragmatic objectivity serves as a regulative ideal for inquiry for Dewey. But what grounds inquiry - what makes it effective? Ultimately, the test of inquiry is experience, specifically 'ordinary' or 'primary' experience. This way of checking our inquiry's results with ordinary experience is what Dewey calls the 'method of denotation'. Dewey writes,

The experiential or denotative method tells us that we must go behind the refinements and elaborations of reflective experience to the gross and compulsory things of our doings, enjoyments and sufferings - to the things that force us to labor, that satisfy needs, that surprise us with beauty, that compel obedience under penalty. (Dewey 1925, 375-6)

This is the practical starting point of Dewey's approach to philosophy; it advises that one starts with life, not words and to check one's theories and formulae against experience not more theory. The method 'warns us', writes Dewey, that all intellectual terms are the products of discrimination and classification", and that

we must, as philosophers, go back to the primitive situations of life that antecede and generate these reflective interpretations, so that we re-live former processes of interpretation in a wary manner, with eyes constantly upon the things to which they refer. (Dewey 1925, 386)

My point here is simple - that objectivity serves inquiry, and inquiry must meet the test of experience. As Peirce showed, pragmatic clarity cannot merely rely on the methods of tenacity or authority, or upon the a priori rehearsal of symbols and theories. Theories must reckon

on with something not already implied by their terms. This Dewey calls the "primacy and ultimacy of the material of ordinary experience". Such experience "provides a check or test for the conclusions of philosophic inquiry" (Dewey 1925, 26).

As Margolis goes to great lengths to point out, objectivity cannot have a 'ground' in the usual, foundational sense; it is part of our ongoing dialogue, part of the flux. Dewey the process philosopher fully agrees. But Dewey understands that in everyday life, people need to terminate inquires, get answers, act, and move on. And so while any ground for pragmatic objectivity *cannot itself be objective* in the now-retired sense, it must find some (non-metaphysical) traction elsewhere. For Dewey, this is experience. Some object, saying that is not enough, but Dewey, James, and other pragmatists have argued that *experience is thick* (funded by the past, anticipating the future) not specious. It has concreteness, haecceity - it is not thin, transitory, fleeting. It is full of social connection, not solipsistic; it is informed by emotions and values.

Margolis avails himself of none of these experience-based resources in his recovery of objectivity. I am not sure why, though my guess would be that he found Dewey's notion too problematic for his theory to take on.<sup>11</sup> This was, in my view, a mistake on Margolis' part. Why? Because Dewey's use of experience at least provides some way of doing more than mentioning the radically empirical, phenomenological, lived dimension in which artworks, selves, and so much else subsists. It provides an additional explanatory strategy concerning how and why inquiries terminate, and what a so-called objective approach to inquiry might be purchasing. Without that account, we are thrown back upon Margolis' skeins of justification involving Intentional properties, the fluxive nature of reality, the artifactual nature of artworks and selves, and the localising force of the *sittlich* notion. None of these offend the Deweyan view, but they don't offer a sufficiently convincing answer to the question, 'Why be objective?'

## 6 Conclusion

It is clear that Margolis is a liberator, one who would free art from the old metaphysical assumptions and dualisms which limit our sense of ourselves. His introduction of Intentional properties, artifactuality, and relativism all work together to make a new form of objectivity plausible. A recovery of objectivity could help us recognise how

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<sup>11</sup> Margolis refers, with some affection, to Dewey's account of 'experience' (in the *Logic*) as "an admittedly exotic, idiosyncratic, blunderbuss of a notion" which is, nevertheless, a solution which "Dewey positively wants" (Margolis 2014).

this important concept could be relativised and deployed locally, in what Dewey would have called 'situations'. We could come to understand that such localised appeals are always enough.<sup>12</sup>

I have agreed with Margolis' general aim, the need to recover objectivity, and I have pressed, with Frega, for a take on objectivity which is more pragmatic. This would be, I think, more practical and salutary in accomplishing the melioristic goals that Margolis proclaims for art and the philosophy of art.

In the end, there may be precious little difference between Margolis' view and my own. If pressed, I would say that my rejection of invariantism (as he calls it) leads not to the construction of alternate, sweeping systems (Margolis' construction of a "philosophical anthropology") but to my conscious adoption of a pragmatism as a stance or attitude. This approach seems, to me, a better way to keep theory and practice in an agile and productive tension. Still, to each his own.

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**12** As with Margolis, Dewey consistently championed these local, experiential checks on runaway abstractionism. For example in Dewey's "Qualitative Thought" (1930) he pushes back against idealistic logicians' insistence upon that particular judgments logically insufficient because they are not universalisable. Defending the particular judgment, Dewey writes, "enough is always enough, and the underlying quality is itself the test of the 'enough' for any particular case. All that is needed is to determine this quality by indicating the limits between which it moves and the direction of tendency of its movement" (Dewey 1930, 255).



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