The ontology of art and knowledge in aesthetics

The ontology of art has provided one of the richest areas of discussion in recent aesthetics, yielding a variety of carefully articulated and well-argued positions about the ontological status of works of music, literature, even painting and sculpture. In some ways the variety of positions seems to be an embarrassment of riches, for it is not clear how we are to decide among these apparently mutually incompatible and often surprising views about whether works of art of some or all kinds are physical objects, abstract objects, action types, and so on. In other respects, work on the ontology of art seems to be embarrassingly impoverished, for there seems to be no natural and nonarbitrary way of answering other questions in the ontology of art, such as how many mistakes a performer may make and yet still perform a work of music; how much restoration a work of painting or sculpture may survive; or even what the exact criteria are for creating a work of literature.

If we hope to resolve these questions and decide among the competing theories, we must step back from the particular debates about the status or identity conditions of a given kind of work to address issues in meta-ontology, particularly as applied to issues in the ontology of art. What are we doing when we argue about the ontological status of works of art? What are the proper methods and criteria of success to be used in answering and evaluating answers to these questions? What kinds of answers can we legitimately expect and demand in questions about the ontology of art?

An influential paradigm of what it is to acquire knowledge has come from a certain (perhaps naïve) view of how the natural sciences and other empirical investigations work. According to this paradigm—call it the discovery view—the world contains a broad range of fully determinate, mind-independent facts about which everyone may be ignorant or in error, but (some of) which the scientist seeks to discover by substantive empirical investigations. Thus, one acquires knowledge about, say, the biological nature of whales by ostensively applying the term ‘whale’ to this kind of thing and undertaking substantive empirical investigations about them (their internal structure, genetics, etc.) in order to discover the real truth about whales’ biological nature, which may overturn our common-sense views about them. Moreover, on this view, there is a complete range of mind-independent facts to be discovered, so that, for any empirical proposition P we could formulate about whales, either P or not-P is the case; the only challenge lies in discovering which.

So, similarly, knowledge claims in the ontology of art are often presented as discoveries of fully determinate, mind-independent facts about the ontological status of works of art of various kinds, about which everyone may be ignorant or in error—so that we should not be surprised if the “right” view turns out to be that works of art are discovered rather than created, action-types rather than objects, and so on, and so that we may rightly demand that theories provide precise answers to any questions we care to invent about, for example, the creation, survival, and identity of works of art. I am not concerned here to either defend or attack this discovery view of knowledge, but rather to argue that—whatever its merits as an understanding of scientific or other empirical investigations—thinking of the process of acquiring knowledge about the ontology of art on that model (as, I think, many have been inclined to do) leads us badly astray.
This paper, then, is an exercise in meta-ontology, as applied to issues in the ontology of art, designed to examine what it is we are doing when we formulate theories about the ontology of art, how we can adjudicate among competing theories, and what the limits of knowledge are in this area. In fact, the points to be made seem to have quite general application to much of what goes under the heading of “ontology” both inside and outside of aesthetics. Thus here as elsewhere, I think that careful study of issues in aesthetics can lead to progress in other areas of philosophy.1

Nonetheless, the ontology of art provides a particularly useful case study, since (I will argue) issues come to prominence here that might otherwise be overlooked. The consequences of rejecting the discovery model of knowledge for ontological issues are also particularly important for aesthetics since this is an area in which debates about the ontological status of the objects concerned (works of art) play a prominent role, with most beginning from the presumption that there are such objects, the only issue being what sorts of things they are. As a result, the field is flooded with all manner of diverse, and often revisionary, proposals about the ontological status of works of art, as well as attempts to answer all sorts of question about works’ identity, creation, and survival. A proper understanding of what we are doing in the ontology of art, I will argue, can lead us to reevaluate this whole ontological side of discourse in aesthetics.

I. THE ONTOLOGY OF ART

The discovery view of knowledge is bolstered by causal theories of reference, which ensure that we have some independent way of picking out kinds like whales or gold (e.g., by ostending a sample), so that we may then go on to investigate their true nature, which may turn out to be at odds with our concepts or initial presuppositions. But the qua problem has made it clear that this sort of view has crucial limitations.2

For any sample will include entities of a great many kinds—physical, chemical, biological, functional, and so forth—so that without some disambiguating concept specifying the sort of kind to be picked out, we cannot unambiguously ground reference to any kind.

In fact, although causal theories of reference have most often been discussed with natural kinds in view, the full virulence of the qua problem becomes evident only when we recognize that our general terms may name not only diverse natural scientific kinds, but also social and cultural kinds, so that in a single situation, would-be grounders of a general term may be confronted with members of a great many kinds: physical and chemical kinds involving the kind of canvas painted on or the chemical structure of the paints used; observable kinds like red thing or square thing, which all may exemplify; institutional kinds like object worth more than $1,000 or entry in the First Annual Ocean Bank Young Artist’s Competition, and so on.

This places at least some constraints on a causal theory of reference and on the possibilities for discovery: at least some frame-level disambiguating concept must be involved to stipulate the kind of kind being named, by specifying the sorts of feature (physical, biological, chemical, etc.) that are to be relevant to unifying the kind. As a result, to disambiguate, grounders of the reference of a term such as ‘whale’ must, for example, intend it as a biological kind (species) term, and so cannot discover themselves to have been wrong about this (though they can discover that there is no biological kind before them and so discover that their term does not refer).3 Nonetheless, they can still discover much about the precise biological nature of their kind, for example, that it is a kind of mammal, not fish, that a certain DNA structure is essential to it, that it evolved in certain ways, and so on. As a result, the constraints at most appear around the edges, and so it seems that the discovery theory can, by and large, be retained for cases of empirical knowledge about the kinds referred to.

But can the discovery theory nonetheless largely be retained for issues of ontology, allowing, for example, for surprising discoveries about the ontological status of works of art of various sorts (say, that works of art are discovered not created, that sculptures are action-types, that works of music cannot be transcribed, nor paintings restored, etc.), paralleling surprising empirical discoveries about whales? I will argue that it cannot—indeed that a careful study of the ontology of art suggests that the
discovery theory is nowhere plausible as applied to ontological (as opposed to empirical) issues.

I argued elsewhere that the disambiguating conception of the sort of kind involved in grounding the reference of art-kind terms must include a nascent concept of the ontological status of the kinds of work involved. As a result, at least a background concept of the ontology of the work of art is needed to establish the reference of terms like ‘painting’ or ‘symphony.’ Such concepts determine the ontological kind, if any, picked out by the term, and so the ontology of the work of art must be something we learn about through conceptual analysis of the associated concepts of people who competently ground (and reground) the reference of terms like ‘symphony’ and ‘painting,’ not something we can seek to discover through investigations into mind-independent reality. Moreover, competent grounders cannot (as a whole) be massively ignorant of or in error about the ontological nature of the art-kind they refer to since their concepts are determinative of this. Thus would-be grounders have some forms of epistemic privilege regarding the ontological status of the art-kinds (if any) they refer to since those forms are determinative of this. This content downloaded from 202.92.130.58 on Thu, 02 Aug 2018 01:38:03 UTC
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works of literature), and so seems to presuppose rather than aid in demarcating these basic art-kinds. One common feature that seems to distinguish members of any art-kind, or any artifactual-kind, from mere members of natural kinds is being the product of human intentions. The products of human activities may of course be classified and referred to in any number of ways (economically, causally, physically, etc.). But central ways of classifying them as artifacts of particular kinds involve classifying them according to the intentions involved in their creation (rather than according to their physical or chemical structure, etc.). Thus Paul Bloom has suggested that the core of artifact concepts is the idea that, in each case, the things were successfully created with the intention that they belong to that very (artifactual) kind; for example, something is a chair only if it is the product of a successful intention to make a chair (as opposed to being a fortuitously shaped tree).8 Similarly, one promising proposal is that at least one sort of feature necessary to unify objects into such art-kinds such as paintings, symphonies, and novels is that they be the products of the same sorts of intentions (namely, intentions to make something of that kind).9 It does seem apt to say that something is a painting only if it is the product of an intention to make a painting (as opposed to the mere unintended byproduct on a drop cloth of a process of painting walls), and that something is a work of music only if it is the product of an intention to make a work of music (thus distinguishing the normal sound of people adjusting radios from that comprising a performance of Cage’s 1956 “Radio Music”). On this view, an artist’s intentions would determine what sort of work (if any) he or she creates—for example, whether a dance or a painting is being created by certain movements that involve the spread of pigments, thereby also determining which of its features are essential (e.g., having roughly this arrangement of pigments), and which accidental (e.g., having been created by way of roughly these gestures). (This, of course, does not entail that an artist’s intentions to create a work of a certain kind always succeed, or that an artist’s intentions determine the proper interpretation or value of his or her work, or the style or value kinds to which it belongs.)

For this proposal to be plausible, we would have to allow that intending to make something of the relevant kind does not require that all makers have use of the same word, or that they must be able to refer back transparently to extant members of the kind. We would also need to allow that intentional creation may involve only intentional selection and appropriation rather than constructing or reshaping an object. But it seems plausible enough that intending to create a chair by appropriating and not changing anything about this stump, or intending to create a sculpture by appropriating and not altering this piece of plumbing, is an act of intentional creation just as, on Alvin Goldman’s view, negations of basic act-types (e.g., intentionally not raising one’s hand during a vote) are also act-types.10 So understood, being created with the same sort of intention does seem plausible as at least a necessary condition for entities to belong in the same art-kind. But can one then establish the reference of an art-kind term semi-ostensively as “whatever was created with the same sort of intention as this was” and go on to investigate the ontological status of members of the kind (about which all speakers may be ignorant or in error)?

ii. The Need for an Ontological Conception

No—even if one accepts all of the above, grounders still cannot establish the reference of an art-kind term with no further concept than that (or even than that plus resemblance among kind members), and go on to investigate the kind’s ontological status. For “being created with the same sort of intention” is not specific enough to disambiguate among the many ontologically different sorts of thing that may be present before grounders, and so the qua problem arises again and prevents would-be grounders from establishing a univocal reference for their term if that is all they have in mind.

To see this, consider the analogous case of action-kinds—for, as has often been noted, there are many similarities between actions and artifacts, as both are (in a sense) products of human intentions.11 Just as actions performed may be layered so that one may intend to raise one’s hand, and also intend to thereby cast
a vote for a particular bill, so may artifacts (among them works of art) be layered so that one may intend to create a particular musical performance and thereby to also create a new (repeatable) musical work, or intend to perform an act of story telling and also intend thereby to create a certain literary work. Similarly, one may intend to create three paintings and thereby to create an altarpiece, or intend to write twenty-seven installments for a magazine and thereby to create a novel. Thus it is not necessarily or even normally the case that, in a given context, a would-be grounder of an action-kind term has members of exactly one action-kind before him or her, or that a would-be grounder of an art-kind term has members of exactly one art-kind before him or her. On the contrary, it is entirely typical that an artist intends to create a song by playing a tune or a triptych by painting three panels.

Suppose a would-be grounder of an action-kind term is standing before a bunch of people in a field and points to one of them saying “that kind of action I will call zaybing.” Such an attempted grounding is hopeless since it is entirely ambiguous which of the many types of (intended) actions the person is performing (say, moving his or her right arm, touching another person, tagging someone, making an “out,” helping his or her team to win the game, etc.) is being named; it is even ambiguous when the supposed sample action of that type begins and ends (taken over a longer spread of time, relevant actions could include playing baseball, passing the time on a Sunday afternoon, improving one’s athletic skills, etc.) Similarly, without a further conception than “work of art like this,” it will remain ambiguous which of the many intended art-kinds instance before a would-be grounder (each of which may have strong internal resemblances among members) the term refers to.

So it seems that in order to unambiguously ground the reference of a general term to name a kind of work of art, the grounder must not only have the idea that the reference of his or her term will be an art-kind, but must also have a background conception of what ontological sort of art-kind he or she means the term to refer to, establishing existence conditions and identity conditions for works of that kind. Such an ontological conception then disambiguates potential reference by determining the ontological kind referred to by the art-kind term (if it succeeds in referring at all), establishing, for example, whether the relevant art-kind is to be a kind of activity or object, a concrete individual or the abstract pattern exemplified by these concrete individuals, and establishing where a work’s spatial and/or temporal boundaries lie and the conditions under which one and the same work survives.

Having such a background conception of course does not require that speakers (or makers) have detailed and sophisticated ontological concepts in mind when they attempt to refer to paintings, songs, or stories. Normally, such ontological disambiguation is achieved not by a philosophical and explicit decision on the part of grounders about what their term will refer to, but rather by appeal to background practices already in place that co-evolve with the use of the art-kind term. Thus, whether we are intending to refer to a concrete or abstract individual is linked to factors like whether we consider it essential to go to a particular place at a given time to see the work of art (as, e.g., we do for paintings but not for works of literature). Whether we intend to refer to an activity or an object is similarly linked to whether it is appropriate to ask, for example, when the work occurs, begins, or ends (as is suitable for plays and musical performances, but not sculptures). What level of work is intended is expressed by practices regarding, for example, whether it is possible to physically move, buy, or sell the work, or only to buy or sell, for example, performance or reproduction rights, and whether we would count the work as destroyed if some particular physical object were destroyed. The extent and limits of the object are similarly reflected in practices such as when we arrive and when we clap, and what is and is not properly remarked upon in reviewing the work (e.g., comments on the frame or dirty back of the canvas are treated as inappropriate to reviewing a work of traditional painting, and comments on the drinks available at intermission are treated as inappropriate to reviewing a play).

Such background practices thus embody a tacit ontological conception of what sorts of things works of that kind are, which (understood by grounders) disambiguates the reference of the relevant kind term, and determines
ontological features of the members of the kind (if any) picked out by the term. These features may then be drawn out in more formal philosophical theories of the ontology of the work of art—explicitly describing, for example, their relevant formal category (object, event, etc.), existence conditions and relations to human intentions and physical objects and processes, and their boundaries and individuation conditions.13

The need for an ontological conception to disambiguate the potential reference of our terms seems to be quite general, for whenever a grounder attempts to establish the reference of a term, there will in fact be a great many ontological kinds of thing available for reference, from biological individuals, to collections of particles, to abstract types, created types, qualities, events, and so on. For reference to be established, we must disambiguate among them. If so, then it is not just for art-kind terms, but for all terms, that grounders’ concepts establish the ontological status of the referent (if any) of their new term. Nonetheless, this general point has often been overlooked. This can be attributed at least in part, I think, to the fact that discussions of causal theories of reference have largely been undertaken with rather precise sorts of natural-kind terms in mind, for example, species terms, chemical-kind terms, and the like. These terms are each specific enough that they are already uniquely associated with background ontological assumptions that provide the needed disambiguation among the diverse ontological kinds present in a grounding situation, and so the specific role played by ontological conceptions is easily missed. But if we consider instead art-kind terms, it becomes obvious that to disambiguate reference, it is essential that we not just associate our term with some or other sort of kind supposed to be named (e.g., art-kind), but with an ontological conception that provides at least some of the necessary disambiguation. Studying art-kind terms is thus particularly helpful, since it helps reveal the role of specifically ontological conceptions in establishing reference where this might otherwise be overlooked.

II. EPISTEMIC AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

If the above is something like the right account of what determines the ontological status of works of art of various kinds, then study of the ontology of art (indeed, of ontology generally) cannot proceed along the discovery model with which we began. We cannot discover the ontological status of paintings, symphonies, or novels first by referring directly to this kind of thing and then investigating its true ontological nature. Instead, the background ontological conception of grounders determines the ontological status of members of the art-kind referred to by the term (if the term refers at all). The ontological status of paintings, symphonies, or works of literature is thus not something we can discover by investigations into the mind-independent world; instead, we must follow the method of analyzing the conception embodied in the practices of those competent speakers who ground and reground reference of the term. As a result, although competent grounders of the term’s reference may not have an explicit ontological view stated in formal philosophical terms, their background ontological conception of the sort of entity they are talking about is not subject to the kinds of massive error to which everyone’s beliefs are subject, according to the discovery model.

These results again seem to be quite general whenever we are talking about the ontological status, identity, and survival conditions of works of art, persons, social institutions, artifacts, and so on. If they are correct, they show that ontological knowledge is always to be acquired by way of this kind of conceptual analysis, and cannot be conceived on the model of an empirical inquiry about mind-independent facts that may turn out to radically overturn our prior beliefs and concepts.

Perhaps this is already tacitly recognized by those working in the ontology of art, who generally do attempt to evaluate theories at least in part by their consistency with ordinary beliefs and practices. Made explicit, though, this observation has some important practical consequences—especially for aesthetics. For recent aesthetics has produced something of a boom in diverse views about the ontology of art, many of which are radically revisionary views, for example, that despite popular belief, all works of art (including paintings and noncast sculptures) are action-types rather than individuals;14 or that literary works are eternal abstracta that can neither be created nor destroyed; or that
plays do not merely present fictional individuals and events, but are themselves fictional objects; or that despite common practice, any transcription of a musical work must be a different work (as Jerrold Levinson somewhat tentatively suggests); or that no painting or sculpture can ever be repaired or restored by replacing broken or worn-out parts, however minor.

If the above arguments are correct, such radical views cannot be presented as discoveries about the “real truth” of the ontology of works of art that may overthrow commonsense and show that we are mistaken in treating works as individuals capable of being bought and sold, things created at a certain time, or as being transcribable or restorable. For the only way to find out the truth about the ontology of the work of art is by way of conceptual analysis that teases out from our practices and things we say the tacit underlying ontological conception of those who ground the reference of the term, perhaps making it more explicit, smoothing out any apparent inconsistencies, and showing its place in an overall ontological picture. Radical solutions cannot be seen as discoveries about what the ontological standing of any art-kind really is, but only as proposals about how we should change our practices—not because they are wrong in the sense of being consistent with the real facts, but only, perhaps, because the proposed change would be clearer, less prone to vagueness, and so forth. (Most often, I think, such proposals are based in following some single strand of current practice through to its extreme limit, at the expense of others.)

But although such massive mistakes about the ontology of art are not possible, the limits of epistemic privilege must be carefully acknowledged: the relevant epistemic privilege is only collective, not individual, and concerns only ontological features of the kind referred to. The above alone does not entail that there is any protection from error about, for example, the causal role of the works of art in the relevant culture, any functions they can or do serve, their histories of production, aesthetic properties, and so forth. All grounders are assured of (collectively) is that, if there is any art-kind referred to by the terms they attempt to ground the reference of, it has the ontological standing they commonly (if tacitly) understand and treat it as having.

III. ONTOLOGICAL SHALLOWNESS AND THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE

The determination of facts about the ontology of art by human concepts, beliefs, and practices has consequences not only for the methods of acquiring knowledge in the ontology of art, but also regarding the nature of the facts involved, and the limits of possible knowledge in this area. The discovery view has it that the world is fully determinate, so that for any proposition P, either P or not-P is the case, with one being made determinately true and the other determinately false by independent facts of the world so that there is, at least in principle, the possibility of discovering the truth or falsehood of any scientific claim.

But this does not seem to be the case in matters to do with the ontology of art, since many awkward questions arise for which it is hard to give any precise and determinate answer without it seeming arbitrary and inappropriate. For example, what percentage of the paint in a painting may be replaced in restoration while preserving the same painting? What sorts of editing or translation can and cannot a T. S. Eliot poem survive? Is a poem created if the poet thinks it up to himself or herself and is promptly run over by a bus? How many mistakes, and of what sort, may be made in a performance if it is to count as a performance of the relevant musical work? We can now see why there seems to be no good way to answer many such questions and why we will err if we try to treat the ontology of art on the discovery model.

Even if the mind-independent world is fully determinate (so that, for any proposition P involving mind-independent facts, either P or not-P is the case), it is certainly not the case that human beliefs and conceptual systems are complete (so that, for any proposition P, either P or not-P is believed, accepted, or treated as being the case). As a result, anywhere the criteria for applying a predicate are determined by human beliefs and practices, risks of indeterminacies and vagueness inevitably arise as a result of the intensionality of human beliefs. To borrow an example from Kit Fine, suppose we define the
predicate ‘nice’ as applied to numbers as follows: n is nice if $n > 15$, n is not nice if $n < 13$. Although some numbers are definitely nice, and some are definitely not nice, other numbers (such as 14) are simply indeterminate with respect to niceness and no further investigations could possibly decide the issue. Similarly, it seems to be built into the beliefs and practices of those who ground reference of the term ‘poem’ and write poetry that it is sufficient to create a poem that a series of words in a public language (following certain rules of rhythm and rhyme) be written down with the intention of creating a poem. It also seems built into the idea that if nothing is done intentionally, no words strung together, no poem has been created. But what, then, do we say about a case in which a person thinks up a series of rhythmically measured lines but is killed before writing or speaking them? Has a poem been created or not? If the background ontological conception of competent speakers does not decide this issue, then it is simply indeterminate and no further investigation into the case could possibly find out a real truth of the matter. Even knowing all the empirical facts about the person and his or her situation would not decide the issue.

Similarly, it is plausibly the case for mind-independent facts of the world that if it is true that there is some x such that Px, then, of some particular item x, it is true that Px. But of course we may accept that there is some x such that Px without accepting, of any particular item, that it is P (as detectives at the start of an investigation commonly accept that there is some x such that x killed Jones without accepting of any person that he or she killed Jones). As a result, where criteria for applying a predicate like ‘same painting as’ are determined only by those conditions accepted by competent speakers and makers, the predicate may be vague. Thus, we seem to commonly accept that if a small area of paint on a painting falls off and is replaced in restoration, the painting survives. We also commonly accept that if all of the paint is removed from a canvas with solvent, and then repainted to exactly resemble the original, the original painting is destroyed. This entails that at some point, replacing “enough” of the pigments on a canvas at once destroys a painting. But there is no point (no percentage of change or some such) such that we accept that that is the breaking point at which the change occurs. As a result, there is no fact of the matter to be discovered about where, precisely, such changes occur—‘same painting as’ is a vague predicate with areas of indeterminate application. As above, where our practices do not definitively determine an answer to the question, no further discoveries of facts, no investigation into the nature of the world could possibly decide these issues.

In sum, since facts about the ontology of the work of art are determined by human conceptions, the resulting facts are, as we might say, ontologically shallow—there is nothing more to discover about them than what our practices themselves determine. We can investigate the world to see if it meets those criteria that are clearly accepted by our practices, and we can try to investigate our practices more closely to see if they might provide a nonarbitrary way to decide a particular issue (say, by extending principles accepted elsewhere). Beyond that, any solutions to these problems must be presented as suggestions or proposals about how we should (stipulatively) decide such issues, not as discoveries of the real facts. Such proposals may be more or less consistent with existing practices, with other values we hold, or more or less practical and workable and may be evaluated accordingly, but again these evaluations are a matter of decision about whether we should accept the proposed change, not a matter of evaluating the truth of a theory. Although this again seems to be a general feature of ontological discussions, it, too, has particular importance in aesthetics, since forcing questions about creation, identity, and survival plays such a prominent role in discussing and evaluating theories about the ontology of art.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Whether explicitly invoked or tacitly presupposed, the discovery model of knowledge often plays a formative role in shaping ontological debates in aesthetics and elsewhere. To some extent this is natural, since it is at least a plausible view about empirical knowledge, which generally serves as our paradigm of knowledge acquisition. Nonetheless, if the above is correct, presupposing this model in discussions of ontology leads us badly astray, for example, into
thinking that wildly revisionary theories may reveal the real truth of the matter, at the expense of everyone’s beliefs and concepts, and into thinking that we should in principle be able to give precise answers to any questions one cares to pose. The case study of art-kinds suggests, however, that facts about the ontological status of members of art-kinds referred to by terms like ‘painting,’ ‘sculpture,’ and ‘novel’ are determined by the beliefs and practices of those who ground the use of such terms and, more generally, that the same goes for the ontological status of the referents of other terms. As a result, the study of ontology has crucial and wide-ranging differences from the discovery paradigm of knowledge, including differences in the sorts of epistemic privilege that are available, the kinds of ignorance and error that are possible, the appropriate methods for acquiring knowledge, and the limits of what can be known. Noting the inappropriateness of the discovery paradigm has particularly important consequences for aesthetics, where it can potentially help us to avoid being taken in by revisionary theories (by noting that these are at best proposals, not discoveries), to avoid being embarrassed by unanswerable questions or forced into offering inappropriate answers, and to determine the proper standards for evaluating claims about the ontology of art.

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1. I have argued for the relevance of issues in aesthetics to other general issues in metaphysics in my Fiction and Metaphysics (Cambridge University Press, 1999) and in “The Ontology of Art,” in the Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics, ed. Peter Kivy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).
3. Of course some have argued that we can be mistaken in thinking, for example, that terms such as ‘cat’ or ‘kangaroo’ refer to biological species, since it could turn out that the things referred to by ‘cat’ are little demons (see Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity [Harvard University Press, 1972], p. 126), or that ‘kangaroo’ refers to a kind of robot (see Richard Miller, “A Purely Causal Solution to One of the Qua Problems,” Australasian Journal of Philosophy 70 (1992): 427). I have argued against this elsewhere (in my unpublished Ordinary Objects), but in any case little hangs here on exactly how precise the relevant disambiguating concept must be—the crucial point is only that there must be a disambiguating ontological concept.
4. Thomasson, “The Ontology of Art.”
13. One consequence of this view is that the ontological status of the objects referred to by terms like ‘painting,’ ‘musical work,’ or ‘sculpture’ may vary over time or across cultures as the background ontological conceptions of those who ground and reground the reference of the term vary (see my “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices,” The British Journal of Aesthetics 43 (2003): 146.)
18. So, similarly, accepting that the ontological status of species is established by grounders’ ontological conceptions does not preclude genuine discoveries and possibilities for error about, for example, whether it is a species of fish or mammal, what its precise DNA structure is, how it evolved, and so on.