

2014

Joseph Margolis

Aili W. Bresnahan

University of Dayton, abresnahan1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub



Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Bresnahan, Aili W., "Joseph Margolis" (2014). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 5.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/5

This Encyclopedia Entry is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Word Count: 3,633

[Main body text: 3,213; Bibliography: 420]

Margolis, Joseph

(b. 1924), American philosopher of aesthetics, history, science and culture.

Methodological Overview. Margolis' methodology is best located in the pragmatic tradition, broadly construed. His pragmatism lies in his commitment to understanding the world as part of collective and consensual human practice and situated interaction, his embracing of the changing nature of history and science, and in his approach to human knowledge as constructed. In particular this pragmatic bent is evidenced by his affinity for Charles Sanders Peirce's semeiotics, by which thought shows us the real world through the interpretation of signs and symbols, and the existence of mind is legitimated as "objective" and "real." Margolis also uses Peirce's theory of predicative generals (as constructed but existent place-holders that focus discourse) in place of universals (as metaphysically fixed and existent types) as a way to discuss the discursive and indeterminate natures of what he considers to be inherently interpretable and significant properties of cultural artifacts (to be described more fully, below, as Intentional properties of artworks). Margolis also agrees with John Dewey's rejection of fixity and certainty and with what he construes as Dewey's "Hegelian" acceptance of the way that a culture's consensual life is connected to its developing history. Lastly, Margolis incorporates the later Wittgenstein's idea of the *Lebensformen* into his idea of how the enlanguaged practice and parameters of a cultural world constrain what we can know about human culture and history and its products. (The later Wittgenstein, in *The Philosophical Investigations*, is seen as pragmatic on some accounts of pragmatism.)

In addition Margolis' approach can be construed as pragmatic in its aim to bridge the conceptual divide between the hermeneutic tradition of continental philosophy and the naturalist approaches within analytic philosophy by creating a hybrid theory in which the interpretable, historical/cultural world is both incarnate in and emergent from the natural or physical world. In his view considering these two worlds together is not contradictory and does not involve one supervening on or being reducible to the other. Instead these two worlds exist together in a symbiotic hybrid of culture and nature that is perceptually discernible, self-interpreting, and metaphysically "real." By "perceptually discernible" he is not limiting perception to sense impressions -- Margolis construes perception in a non-purely phenomenal, mind-involved way. On his account we are "in" the world of both nature and culture simultaneously, and our understanding of the world, and the particular existents of the world whether they are cultural (such as artworks and forms of discourse) or natural (such as mountains and chemical processes) requires us to employ both our joint natural/cultural conceptual resources and our capacity to reflect on culture's role in how we acquire, understand and use these resources.

Theoretical Overview and Orientation. The common denominator in Margolis' work is his claim that the continually changing and non-teleological collective thinking and active practices of the culture in which we learn to speak is an ineluctable part of how we understand and interpret the world, art, history, science and ourselves. He acknowledges that this is a radical departure from the traditional and popular views in his various arenas of interest, taking time to demonstrate which metaphysical assumptions and tenets must fall or be revised if his theory is true. Margolis criticizes Aristotle's archism, for example, for instituting the idea that

metaphysical essences must be fixed and unchanging. He also criticizes Kant's transcendental method for ignoring both "historicity" (to be defined below under the subheading on History) and for misconstruing or ignoring the human self (see section on Selves, below). Following these, Margolis criticizes ideas such as the existence of laws of nature or of a human rationality that could exist apart from cultural influences, the mind/body dichotomy, idealism without realism, and the idea that there can be one, determinate interpretation of an artwork that is correct for all time.

Culture. Culture is the foundational concept upon which the entire body of Margolis' work is built. To understand his theory of art, for example, including the nature of an artwork and what interpretation of an artwork entails, requires understanding that for Margolis culture is agentive, which means that its actions are what causes it to move, grow, change and develop. Culture moves the progress of human life and drives history even as culture is constituted by and constructed by human beings. Margolis' view of culture is similar, but not identical, to Hegel's *Geist*, Peirce's cosmic mind (although Margolis has a sense of a human collective rather than divine mind at work here) and Wittgenstein's idea of *Lebensformen* and language games. Culture is thus a communal, collective, network of practices, behaviors and systems that has been constructed by thinking selves who have already themselves been constituted by and continue to be influenced by this culture even as they create and develop it. There is no action or actor, for Margolis, that is independent of culture. When a person speaks or "utters" something "lingually" (which for Margolis is not limited to "linguistic" utterances in a formal grammar system but includes actions such as dancing, making love or baking bread) s/he can only do so because s/he

has used his or her natural capabilities to learn to make use of the cultural resources available (such as learning to speak a natural language, read, write, play piano or cook). These “natural capabilities” upon which a person relies, however, are themselves what they are due to both biological *and* cultural evolution, since on Margolis’ view biological evolution develops at a far slower pace than does cultural evolution, which can change on a moment’s notice, as when a nation declares war. At no time, however, can biological evolution operate independently of culture in the human person. For Margolis creatures that are “pre-lingual” are thus merely “proto-human,” by which he means that they are on their way, evolutionarily, to being human persons or selves. Since culture and selves develop together in non-fixed, non-determined or pre-determined ways, this creates a view of culture that admits of relativism in the sense that culture is relative to the practices of the selves that comprise it. Tethering culture to the collective practices and values of selves and vice-versa should not here be confused with the idea that truth or knowledge is variable in some way; although it does provide a clue to understanding Margolis’ larger-scale relativism, which includes the idea that everything we can construe as “true” or “known” in the world, including that knowledge that we obtain through engagement with natural objects and phenomena in the physical sciences, is tied to our culturally developed competence to construct, understand and apply these concepts to the correct referents. Indeed, on Margolis’ account, even theoretical work in the natural (and not just human) sciences is deeply entrenched in culture; it is not and can never be “pure” in any way that would suggest any sort of cognitive privilege, separation or distinction that would make our understanding in this arena somehow “objective.” Margolis concedes that there are forms of emergence that exist in the natural world that are entirely reducible materially, such as the chemical processes of thunder or lightning, but he holds

that as soon as we describe these processes in a treatise on this process we are involved in an interpretive activity that involves our cultural resources and this makes our theories on these processes themselves culturally emergent entities (see section on Selves or Persons below for more on culturally emergent entities). As such scientific theories are on no higher footing, in terms of their nature as culturally emergent entities, than are theories of art.

Selves or Persons. Margolis holds that without culture we are merely lumps of physical matter, or biology; we have no thought, we have no agency, we have no context or concepts by which to communicate, innovate, understand, contemplate, take meaningful actions or live truly human lives. Thus selves or persons are what Margolis terms *culturally emergent entities*. We are the ongoing products or artifacts of culture, or what Margolis sometimes calls “second-natured selves” following Marjorie Grene (see Grene, “People and Other Animals” in *The Understanding of Nature: Essays in the Philosophy of Biology*, Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974, 346-60). We have emerged from matter in a *sui generis* way through incremental, biological steps along the evolutionary chain of development and at the moment that we acquired the capacity for language, collectively, consensually, through practice, we became “symbiotic” instruments of culture, making use of physical, natural and cultural resources in pursuit of various goals within our (now-)meaningful lives. It is in this sense that Margolis in his later works refers to his philosophical approach as a whole as an attempt to “Darwinize Hegel” (see, for example, *Pragmatism Ascendent*, 119-23). In addition, selves necessarily both interpret the world in which we are placed and are self-interpreting. As such, Margolis sometimes refers to selves as “texts” since like texts we are open to interpretation and re-interpretation – including interpretation of

our capacity to interpret. If we abstract culture away from the self what remains, on Margolis' view, are just our natural capacities and aptitudes for being cultural agents; that is all biological "nature" provides. Selves as they exist as culturally emergent entities thus have no fixed "essences" or "natures" but are instead viewed as ever-changing and developing "careers." This also explains why Margolis treats artworks, as culturally emergent entities, as careers rather than as entities with fixed, particular essences (see sub-headings on the work of art and on interpretation, below).

The Work of Art. On Margolis' view a work of art is something that is brought into being by a human self or person, who is him- or herself a culturally emergent entity in the sense described earlier. A work of art, like a self, is typically embodied in some material entity or event, which is not reducible to the physical but that is accessible via our concepts, discernible and real in some communicative form that is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation by the appreciators of that artwork. It is that material form that may be classified and individuated as a work of art for purposes of numerical (which is determinate) rather than for metaphysical (which for Margolis can never be determinate as to "nature") identity. Even a conceptual work of art like one of the red square paintings hypothesized by Arthur Danto in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* are not on Margolis' view (pace Danto) indiscernibles; meaning that they are not indistinguishable in perception from the "mere real things" of the non-art world (see *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, as well as the entries by Grigoriev and Puolakka on this issue in the bibliography below). Instead, on Margolis' view the concept and context of art by which a culturally

entrenched self accesses a red square painting lies in his or her competence to make an interpretive judgment as to what the discernible properties of the work refer. If they refer to something imaginary or real or an artistic idea of some sort that gives the work meaning in any of the ways that the culture ascribes artistic meaning to works of art (via expressivity, representation, and the like) then those can be conceived as Intentional properties of the work with a capital "I" (more on Intentional properties below). In kind, an artwork is no different than any other inherently interpretable cultural artifact. What makes it "art" rather than a postage stamp, for example, just lies in the collective practices of the culture by which it is identified. This means that distinctions can be made between the practice of art and the practice of shipbuilding or of medicine or of chemistry in terms of the typical functions, contents or subject matter of the practices involved – certain practices of art may aim at expression of emotion, or to transgress cultural norms in a way that makes the viewer have to contemplate those norms, whereas work in science may involve understanding the processes by which a gene mutates for theoretical and/or practical reasons. However, there is no fixed "essence," function, content or form that makes an artwork "art" for all time and therefore there is no hard-and-fast line that can be drawn between works of art and non-art objects. When we engage in discourse about "art," then, we are using that term as a *façon de parler* in order to organize the works we plan to discuss according to their socio-cultural and historical context as entities situated within the cultural practice of what has been called "art." We are not identifying a type of object separable from other culturally emergent entities in any way that goes deeper than the cultural history of this practice rather than another. Artworks, like human selves, are thus better conceived as "careers"

rather than “natures,” with the possibility existing that changes in culture can and do change the Intentional properties, and thus the meaning, of a work of art, including even its status *qua* art.

Intentional Properties. “Intentional properties” is a term of art that Margolis uses to include and go beyond both the intentional thought (lower-case “i”) of Edmund Husserl and Franz Brentano as the content of thought that is directed outwards towards an external referent and the intensional attributes (with an “s” rather than a “t” following the initial “t”) of meanings that are definitionally internal and thus non-extensional, as when the meaning of a horse as a quadruped is applied to the term “horse” (see Margolis, *Historied Text, Constructed World*, 197-9). In keeping with the rest of Margolis’ metaphysics of culture, Intentional properties are incarnate in discernible artworks; the art is existent and “in” the work rather than transparent (this forms the gist of Margolis’ complaint against Danto and other philosophers of art) and yet they are not tethered to the materiality of the work and thus can change with new interpretations and reinterpretations. If the “red” property of a red-square painting for example, were to change in cultural meaning to no longer signify “communist” but to signify “carnivorous,” for example, the non-false interpretations of that painting could be expanded to include carnivorousness. Thus the metaphysics of an artwork, the art-significant part of which resides in its culturally-tethered Intentional properties, cannot include any fixed “essence” or “nature.” Margolis’ view also allows for the possibility that the redness of the red-square painting’s meaning, even housed in the same material painting over time, might lose the meaning of “red-as-communist” altogether if this meaning goes out of the stable of cultural meanings for “red.” Thus Margolis holds that the

meaning of an artwork is not, contrary to many theories of art, tied to the intention of the artist, its provenance, or the cultural meaning of the work at any particular time in history. (For more on this see the sub-headings on Interpretation and on History, below.)

Intentional Properties are Determinable but Not Determinate. Margolis describes this open-ended, continually subject-to change feature of the Intentional properties in culturally emergent entities as “determinable but not determinate,” a phrase that has confounded many a Margolis scholar. What he means by this phrase is not a Peircean indeterminacy in the sense of incompleteness that might one day (in the full course of time and evolution) be determinate but instead that they are only determinable (in the sense of being able to be determined as in discerned as true at the moment of interpretation in this culturally relative way), via interpretation, until that time when either the interpretative practices change or the Intentional properties upon which those interpretations rely change. In this way Margolis rejects Peircean progressivism and fallibilism, in which knowledge can be made perfect over the course of time, both in science and as it might apply to art. (For the details of this rejection see *The Flux of History and The Flux of Science*, 60-7). Indeed, this is the precise point on which Margolis disagrees with Michael Krausz on interpretation, which Margolis attributes to Krausz’ tendency to follow Peircean metaphysics in this way (see Margolis, *Selves and Other Texts*, 112, 123-5, 127, 129-30). Thus Margolis’ view is that Intentional properties cannot ever be made “determinate” in any sense that would make them determinate for all time. The “determinable” part of the phrase exists just to show that interpretations, while they last, can be made and that at the socio-historical moment at which they are made they can be “true” subject to all the caveats acknowledging the cultural construction and understanding of the word “true” and on a sense of

“true” that means something more like “apt” than a sense of the word “true” that requires a fixed referent.

Interpretation. Margolis holds that interpretation can change artworks; an artwork’s identity is neither limited to the efforts or intentions of the artist nor to any one assessment of the work. Interpretations do not just identify Intentional properties but can constitute them and even change them even if the material artwork remains identical as to its natural properties. This is because the “reality” of the cultural world to which Intentional properties belong is continually constructed and reconstructed by human selves who are themselves encultured. Margolis’ theory of interpretation has led some philosophers to worry that it is logically incoherent (see Davies, Krausz and Shusterman, and Stecker entries in the bibliography below). In general the concern is that Margolis’ sense of what is “true” in interpretation, which as explained before means something more like “apt” in a culturally-relative way because it applies to determinable rather than determinate properties, provides a relativistic truth that diminishes “true” to “true-for-x.” Margolis denies that his eschewing of bivalent truth values for interpretation of culturally emergent entities leads to any inconsistency once one understands that on a multi-valued logic one can have inconsistent interpretations of an artwork that are true in the sense of apt, reasonable, or probable without one of them being false, which can happen in the case of one artwork sustaining different meanings when understood relative to culture (but not relative to truth).

History and Historicity. Margolis' view on history and "historicity," which he defines as "the notion that thought and the forms of human existence are themselves the changing artifacts of changing history" (Margolis, *Historied Thought, Constructed World*, 7) is best understood in light of his radicalized, pragmatic metaphysics and his theory of the primacy of culture. For Margolis history is both constituted by and itself constitutes human thought. It thus unfolds and changes and develops in conjunction with collective trends in human thought. Like the human self, and like thought (which for Margolis exists in the collective practices of human culture), history thus has no fixed, essential structure and historical time is not identical to physical time. Further, there can be no getting history "right" for all time through any particular narrative, although such narratives are real and not fictional, just as there can be no single, correct interpretation of any other culturally emergent entity that can remain true for all time. It is on these grounds that Margolis criticizes "traditionalist" and "progressivist" theories of history (and science), which hold that there are either invariant laws of or guiding history or certain "truths" about human nature or reason that can be recovered from within variability. (For more on this see *The Flux of History and The Flux of Science*.)

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Margolis, Joseph. "Farewell to Danto and Goodman." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, No. 4 (October 1998): 353-74.

Margolis, Joseph. *Historied Thought, Constructed World: A Conceptual Primer for the Turn of the Millennium*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

- Margolis, Joseph. *Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly: The New Puzzle of the Arts and History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Margolis, Joseph. *On Aesthetics: An Unforgiving Introduction*. Belmont, Wadsworth, 2009.
- Margolis, Joseph. "Plain Talk About Interpretation on a Relativistic Model." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, No. 1 (Winter, 1995): 1-7.
- Margolis, Joseph. *Pragmatism's Advantage: American and European Philosophy at the End of the 20th Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Margolis, Joseph. *Pragmatism Ascendent: A Yard of Narrative, A Touch of Prophecy*.
- Margolis, Joseph. *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001.
- Margolis, Joseph. *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Towards a Philosophical Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. This book is a companion to *Pragmatism's Advantage* and *Pragmatism Ascendent*.
- Margolis, Joseph. "The Autographic Nature of the Dance." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, No. 4 (Summer, 1981): 419-27.
- Margolis, Joseph. *The Cultural Space of the Arts and the Infelicities of Reductionism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Margolis, Joseph. *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. This book is a companion book to *Interpretation Radical but Not Unruly*.
- Margolis, Joseph. "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, No. 1 (Autumn, 1977): 45-50.

Margolis, Joseph. *The Unraveling of Scientism: American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

Margolis, Joseph. *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

Other sources

Davies, Stephen. "Relativism in Interpretation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, No. 1 (Winter, 1995): 8-13.

Krausz, Michael, and Richard Shusterman, eds. *Interpretation, Relativism, and the Metaphysics of Culture: Themes in the Philosophy of Joseph Margolis*. New York: Humanity Books, 1999.

Grigoriev, Serge. "A Reply to Puolakka." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2006), online.

Grigoriev, Serge. "Living Art, Defining Value: Artworks and Mere Real Things." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), online.

Puolakka, Kalle. "Interrupting Danto's Farewell Party Arrangements: Comments for Grigoriev." *Contemporary Aesthetics* 4 (2006), online.

Stecker, Robert. "Relativism about Interpretation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, No. 1 (Winter, 1995): 14-18.

AILI BRESNAHAN