

Descriptivism in Meta-Ontology of Music: A Plea for Reflective Equilibrium

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Abstract: In this paper, I investigate one popular view in current methodological debate about musical ontology, namely, descriptivism. According to descriptivism, the task of musical ontology is to offer a description of the ‘structure of our thought’ (Kania, 2008, p. 437) about musical works, as it manifests itself in actual musical practices. In this regard, descriptivists often appeal to our pre-theoretical intuitions to ground ontological theories of musical works.

This method, however, is worrisome, as such intuitions are unstable and contradictory. For example, there is a broad variety of intuitions in our musical practice concerning what counts as an authentic performance of a musical work. All such intuitions reflect at least a part of actual practice; however, they are in conflict with each other. This raises a problem, for how can they thus represent a reliable basis for our ontology? A further worry for descriptivism concerns the triviality of the knowledge it gives us access to. If, according to descriptivism, the task of musical ontologists is simply to codify the regularities found in our intuitive thought or discourse about practice, then how can the resulting theories be informative at all with regard to the object of their concern?

Keywords: Meta-Ontology of Music; Descriptivism; Reflective Equilibrium

In this paper, I investigate one popular view in current methodological debate about musical ontology¹, namely, descriptivism. A few famous exceptions aside², the majority of scholars in the debate lean today towards what has been called a ‘descriptive’ metaphysical approach (Strawson, 1959, p. 9) one concerned with providing an ontological theory of musical works that proves consistent with our intuitive thought and discourses about actual musical practice³, rather than with the demands of abstract metaphysics.

One main worry for descriptivism concerns the reliability of what it takes as the main sources for ontological theorizing, i.e., the pre-theoretic intuitions that are implicit in, or govern our artistic practices. Sometimes these intuitions are contradictory, and support opposing ontological theories on the same subject. Sometimes they are just vague or confused, and do not offer us much guidance to decide on puzzle cases. For example, there is a broad variety of intuitions in our musical practice concerning what counts as an authentic performance of a musical work. All such intuitions reflect at least a part of actual practice; however, they are in conflict with each other. This raises a problem, for how can they thus represent a trustworthy basis for our ontology? A further worry for descriptivism concerns the triviality of

¹ Though musical ontology represents my main focus here, all the considerations made in this paper can be extended to the ontology of art broadly construed. This is because the ontology of music is generally developed within, and in relation to, the more comprehensive framework of the ontology of art.

² One notable example is Dodd (2012, 2017), who can be considered, a committed assertor of revisionism in musical meta-ontology.

³ ‘Actual musical practice’, here and in the rest of the paper, stands for the different activities of composers, performers, critics and educated audiences.

the knowledge it gives us access to. If, according to descriptivism, the task of musical ontologists is simply to codify the regularities found in our intuitive thought or discourse about practice (Kania, 2008), then how can the resulting theories be informative at all with regard to the object of their concern?

Despite the extent of these worries, I argue that a possible strategy to rescue descriptivism against criticism is the so-called method of *reflective equilibrium*, as originally envisaged by John Rawls (1971) in the field of philosophical ethics. Adopting reflective equilibrium may provide descriptivism with a procedure to filter or systematize pre-theoretical intuitions, thus making it more resistant to the problems generated by the instability and inconsistency of intuitions. Recourse to reflective equilibrium, on the other hand, may give descriptivists a tool to revise some aspects of their data in light of reflections that lead to the most coherent ontological theory of musical works. In this way, ontology retains its *explanatory validity* (see: Kraut, 2014; Davies, 2017).

In what follows, I begin by offering a brief overview of current debate in musical ontology. A great part of the discussion seems driven today by a meta-ontological concern, aimed to establish how musical ontology needs to be done, i.e., its proper methods and purposes. I then present *descriptivism* for how it has been construed by some of its proponents (Kania, 2008; Thomasson, 2004; 2005; 2006). After considering the main worries faced by descriptivist-oriented theories, I discuss the possible benefits of applying reflective equilibrium to a descriptivist ontology of art.

1. Introduction

Throughout the past decades, the ontology of music has attracted an ever-increasing deal of attention on the part of analytic philosophers. The causes are a matter for speculation, but two are at least likely. First, the contemporary renaissance in fundamental metaphysics, which has had such major impact on analytic philosophy in general and on analytic aesthetics in particular (Thomasson, 2004, p. 92).⁴ Second, the growing recognition that musical works present their own independently interesting dilemmas for anyone concerned with the discipline of ontology. Out of the astounding number of issues that have been brought to discussion, the following debates can be isolated.

The first is what Julian Dodd (2008, p. 1113) calls ‘the categorial debate’: What kind of ontological category do musical works belong to? Some classical positions contend that works of music are sets or classes of performances (Goodman, 1968), abstract entities (Wollheim, 1968) eternal sound-types (Dodd, 2007), initiated types (Levinson, 1980; 1990), etc.

A second debate revolves around what Dodd (2008, p. 1113) calls the ‘individuation question’: What conditions must a performance satisfy to be an *authentic* performance of a musical work? Answer to this question implies determining what kinds of properties are essential to a work’s identity (Davies, 2001). Whether an authentic performance of a work has to comply with the script (Goodman, 1968) or with composer’s instrumentation, tempo and dynamics (Levinson, 1979) depends indeed on which of these features are considered essential.

Finally, there is the issue raised by non-standard musical genres: How to think of those musical forms that do not belong to the classical tradition? Philosophers committed to the ‘comparatist’ debate (Kania, 2017)

⁴ In fact, one may wonder how ontology could flourish precisely within analytic philosophy, i.e., within a kind of philosophy that, for many years, was hostile to the very idea of metaphysics. Arguably, ontology became respectable again in 1948, when Quine published his famous paper titled *On What There Is*. It was Quine – against the Carnapian tradition – who made ontology a serious subject.

maintain that many arguments in the ontology of classical music are simply not applicable to music such as jazz, rock and pop (Kania, 2006; Young – Matheson 2000; Gracyk 1996; Pouivet 2010) and that these genres deserve independent investigation.

1.2 Deflationist Trends and the Methodological Turn in Musical Ontology

In recent years, perhaps as a side-effect of this newly matured interest, deflationism⁵ about the whole enterprise of musical ontology has spread in the literature. Many have replied negatively to the question of whether ontology can tell us anything but trivial about music, and critics have probed the value of each debate in the field.

Some have doubted that *categorial* discussions are *genuine* in the first place. James Young (2014) has argued, for instance, that the issue of finding out the fundamental ontological category to which musical works belong should be dismissed as a “pseudo-problem”. Suppose all musical works were eternal sound-types that are discovered and not created. How could this have any impact on our aesthetic appreciation of them? (Young, 2011, p. 297; 2014, p. 15).

Alternatively, criticisms against the *identification* debate have been raised by Aaron Ridley (2004), who denies that the ontology of music will ever provide us with any relevant aesthetic payoff. A sensible philosophical relationship to music should consist, according to Ridley, in figuring out how to *evaluate* musical performances, but the self-representing value-neutral ontological debate over musical works is irrelevant in this regard (Ridley, 2004, pp. 113–114).

More recently, there have also been arguments against the allegedly overly-complicated *comparatist* approaches to musical ontology. The problem here is that identifying a different ontological category for each musical genre or tradition seems to multiply entities beyond necessity (Kania, 2017). We may want to distinguish works in rock music from works in folk, indie, progressive rock and so on, but this looks like a slippery slope: how far can we go (Dodd, 2014)?

As a way out of the deflationist trend, an increasing number of scholars have recently started to shift the focus of attention from first-order debates⁶ to issues concerning *methodology*, i.e., the procedurals, methods and criteria that lie at the basis of ontology. One shared feeling in this regard is that in the absence of “agreed-upon methodological standards”, controversies in the field of musical ontology will show little hope of being resolved (Thomasson, 2006). In this vein, something as a ‘methodological turn’ has started to make its way in the philosophical community. In a nutshell, participants in the methodological debate search for adequate answers to three fundamental questions:

1. *What* are the suitable objects or data for musical ontology? Which sources should we consider while formulating an ontological theory? Which may be relevant and which may not? 2. *How* ought ontological theorizing to be accomplished? What norms or criteria should guide us in formulating an ontological theory? 3. *Why* shall one engage in the ontology of music? What is (or should be) the *purpose* of ontological investigations about music? What kind of knowledge do we hope to obtain?

These three questions are obviously interconnected. Different data seem to require different methodological treatments, and one’s understanding of the purpose of ontology impinge on the method

⁵ I take ‘deflationism’ here as the view according to which answers to ontological questions are just trivial or verbal ones, and that ontological disputes are therefore non-substantial.

⁶ It is common to distinguish ‘first-order’ debates made within ontological discourse, from ‘higher-order’ debates made about ontological discourse.

one chooses to adopt. Ultimately, it seems that one cannot separate the question of how we should do musical ontology from the question of what we can expect musical ontology to do for us. For instance, if one takes musical ontology as an enterprise able to *add* to the sum of our knowledge by discovering new and potentially debunking facts about musical phenomena, along the line of the empirical sciences, certain conclusions on its proper procedures would follow. Alternatively, if one thinks that the task of musical ontology is to enable us to attain a clearer understanding of what is implicit in our musical practice, opposite conclusions would obtain with respect to methodology.

In the literature, these two approaches are respectively defined *revisionism* – the idea that our best ontological theories can debunk our folk-intuitions about musical phenomena –, and *descriptivism* – the idea that the task of ontology is to describe and/or codify the folk-intuitions shared by participants in the musical practice. As renown, the distinction between revisionism and descriptivism can be traced back to a tradition coming prominently from Peter Strawson (1959), who introduces it to discuss the broader issue of determining the task of general metaphysics.

In the following section, I will present and discuss descriptivism for how it has been construed by some of its major proponents in the literature about musical ontology. I will then consider some of the major problems in which this methodology seems to incur.

2. Descriptivism

In Strawson's view, a descriptive metaphysics is one that "*describes the actual structure of our thought about the world*" (Strawson, 1959, p. 9) – our perception of the world for how it is reflected in ordinary thought and language.⁷ According to this general characterization, descriptive metaphysics' main aim is the finding of reasons for what we believe "on instinct". Instinctive beliefs form what Strawson calls "our conceptual scheme", a repertoire of pre-theoretical intuitions, thoughts and insights that shape our common-sensical image of the world and remain somehow stable beyond and before the philosophical revolutions caused by the changing of metaphysical paradigms⁸. Making this core of shared concepts explicit and contributing to their clarification is precisely what Strawson thinks the business of the descriptivist metaphysician should be. In this scenario, metaphysics is not committed toward discovering new truths about a particular issue, for "*there are no new truths to be discovered*" (Strawson, 1959, p. 10), but relies upon the method of *conceptual analysis*; indeed: "*a close examination of the actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy*" (Strawson, 1959, p. 9).

Significantly, one first attempt to import methodological descriptivism in the art-ontological debate was made by Jerrold Levinson.⁹ If there is anything like a 'conceptual scheme' in the field of music¹⁰, Levinson

⁷ Revisionary metaphysics, on the contrary, is one that "is concerned to produce a better structure" (Strawson, 1959, p. 9), presumably one that pictures the world as it is, independently of our thought about it.

⁸ "*There are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all [...] It is with these, their interconnections, and the structure that they form, that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned*" (Strawson, 1959, pp. 11–12).

⁹ At least according to the reconstruction provided by Kania (2008). Kania claims that Levinson's paper has produced a sort of methodological 'turnaround' in the debate about musical ontology, by setting out a whole new set of priorities.

¹⁰ This is, however, controversial. To adapt Strawson's notion of 'conceptual scheme' to the musical domain, one should assume that there exists something as a perennial and a-historical 'musical common sense'. This assumption, however, can be criticized both diachronically, by saying that theories on music has evolved throughout history, and synchronically, by considering that different cultural and social traditions have their own different pre-theoretical conception of music (see: Ruta, 2013).

contends in a famous paper (1980), it must be the task of ontology to unearth it. This point is made clear in his defense of the commonly-held intuition that musical works are created rather than discovered. We should hold onto ‘creationism’, Levinson argues, because this “*is one of the most firmly entrenched of our beliefs about art*”, and what’s more, one which is really ubiquitous (Levinson, 1990, p. 216). More generally, Levinson’s concern in the paper is with demonstrating that *priority* must be given to the demands of the actual musical *practice* rather than to the demands of *abstract metaphysics*. An ontology which favors abstract theoretical virtues such as parsimony and consistency to adherence to musical practice is doomed to lose its grip. This is why, according to Levinson, only a descriptivist methodology can obtain for musical ontology.

In recent decades, many philosophers have complied with Levinson’s call for a descriptivist musical ontology. A nice example is Amie Thomasson (2004; 2005; 2006). In her writings about art ontology, Thomasson argues that investigating artworks’ ontological status means analyzing the assumptions that are embodied in the discourses of those “*competent speakers who ground and reground reference of our art terms*” such as ‘work of music’ (Thomasson, 2005, p. 226). In Thomasson’s view, these assumptions are conceived as forming something analogous to Strawson’s conceptual scheme, a rather general background conception that supports structure for all related artistic practices such as performing, analysing, criticizing etc. The proper way to approach art ontology is therefore, according to Thomasson, by paying attention to how this background conception grounds the reference of art-kind terms as used in the ordinary discourses of art-connoisseurs (Thomasson, 2004; 2005). To investigate the ontological status of a *sonata*, for example, we need to analyze the rules that determine the conditions of application of the term in the context of the relevant practices. Ontological inquiries should thus consist, according to Thomasson, in a ‘conceptual analysis’ of the way in which musical and art concepts are used by competent speakers; the appropriate methodology being to codify “*the assumptions about ontological status built into the relevant practices and beliefs of those dealing with works of art, to systematize these, and put them into philosophical terms*” (Thomasson, 2004, pp 87–88).

Another version of descriptivism is defended by Andrew Kania (2008; 2012). Kania takes as his starting point the fact that we have certain ontological intuitions about musical and artistic works that are “*rooted in our practice*” – that we believe that musical works come to existence via an act of composition, that they are repeatable etc. (Kania, 2008, p. 431). These intuitions, he argues, should constitute the basis of ontological investigations. Indeed, according to Kania, musical and art works, *qua* cultural artefacts, are *determined* in their nature and properties on the system of beliefs that governs complex socio-artistic practices (Kania, 2008, p. 438). This means, according to Kania, that musical works do not possess a nature which is *independent* of the way we conceive them in the context of actual practice: “*how musical works are depends upon how people think about them*” (Kania, 2008, p. 438). As a consequence, what ontological inquiries must do is to try to describe and make explicit our pre-theoretic thought about music. Descriptivism, as the methodology aimed at “*offering a description of the ‘structure of our thought’ about artworks*” (Kania, 2008, p. 437), is thus the only suitable methodology for musical ontology. But if “*in proposing a theory of the ontology of art we are really offering a description of the ‘structure of our thought’ about artworks, then the existence and nature of such philosophical arcana as types, properties, and so on, look like they might be beside the point*” (Kania, 2008, p. 437).

2.1 Descriptivism's Conceptual Structure

While the list of contemporary philosophers embracing one or another type of descriptivism could go on¹¹, we have now sufficient ground to enucleate what seems to be the basic conceptual structure underlying descriptivism, as a methodology for musical ontology. For this purpose, we may refer to the three central questions mentioned above.

1. *What*-question (what are the suitable objects or data for musical ontology?): According to descriptivism, our *pre-theoretical intuitions*, as implicit in wide-spread social practices regarding the arts and music, provide us with the central data to be explained by ontological means. Basic facts about the ontological status of artworks – their existence, identity and persistence conditions – can be ‘extracted’ from such intuitive data found in the actual practices.
2. *How*-question (how ought aesthetic theorizing to be accomplished?): in the descriptivist picture, the criteria to be used in construing and evaluating different ontological proposals rely fundamentally in the *coherence* with practice. This means that no correct ontological theory of musical works can substantially overthrow our pre-theoretical ways of thinking of the various artworks.
3. *Why*-question (what is the purpose of doing musical ontology?): according to descriptivism, the main aim of art ontology is to capture and describe the way in which people think and talk about artworks in the context of the actual social practices related to the different arts.

This has a bearing on the *limits* of the possible knowledge acquirable through ontological investigations. In cases where our practices are unclear about certain aspects – say, how many mistakes can be made in if a performance is to count as an instance of a certain work, etc. – our ontological picture itself shall be vague. As a consequence, there may simply be no *ultimate answer* to these questions. Indeed, according to descriptivism, either ontological disputes are answerable through analysis of our practices and examination of our folk intuitions, or they must be considered as *unanswerable*. Since our ontological knowledge is gleaned through human conception, it may turn out to be just ‘ontologically shallow’, in the sense that “*there is nothing more to discover about them than what our practices themselves determine*” (Thomasson, 2005, p. 228).

3. Some Worries for Descriptivism

If my reconstruction is correct, and despite the contemporary success of descriptivist approaches in art ontology¹², we have *prima facie* a number of reasons to worry about descriptivism's main assumptions. In particular, what strikes one as particularly troublesome is the role attributed in this view to our pre-theoretical intuitions. One can notice, in the first place, a confusion in terminology. How are we to figure out what descriptivism means by the term ‘intuitions’? Throughout the history of philosophy, the notion of ‘intuition’ has taken on an enormous number of connotations. Descriptivists do not seem to be concerned with the nuance the notion acquires in Kantian philosophy, nor do they seem to refer to something as an inner sense or a special faculty of any kind. But then, do they consider the intuitions

¹¹ A further form of descriptivism is endorsed by Guy Rohrbaugh (2003; 2013) Whatever artworks are metaphysically, Rohrbaugh claims, first and foremost they are the objects of our thought, discourse, appreciation and evaluation (Rohrbaugh, 2013, p. 29). Therefore, according to Rohrbaugh, ontology should be consistent with and responsive to artistic practice, if it wants to understand the objects of its concern. However, Rohrbaugh resist the idea that the task of ontology is limited to capture the way we intuitively think of artworks in our artistic practices.

¹² Julian Dodd calls it “*the hegemonic thesis in the metaontology of art*” (Dodd, 2012, p. 1050).

philosophers of music are supposed to work with innate *beliefs*? Or are they rather taken as spontaneous unreflective *judgments*? Should they be considered as ‘self-evidently true’ or merely ‘appealing’?

Secondly, and whatever definition one may choose to adopt, a stronger set of concerns addresses the idea that intuitions may *warrant* our knowledge about the relevant things. This line of reasoning seems based on a simple analogy. Just as perception, in empirical science, provides us with evidence of how things stand in the extra-mental world, intuitions provide us with the relevant evidence about the *ontological status* of the things we are concerned with. But is this analogy tenable? Do intuitions really constitute a reliable basis on which to ground our ontology?

3.1 Instability of Intuitions

The first standard problem for musical descriptivism concerns the *unstable* nature of intuitions. Indeed, we all know that more often than not our intuitions are variable and mutable. Our practices and beliefs regarding music and the arts are not constant in time but change according to period, culture, social contingencies, and the intrinsic development of art itself. Throughout history, different groups of people have constructed different vocabularies for speaking about music according to their personal interests and practices; that is, they have referred to musical works as entities with varying identity and persistence conditions, even if they have apparently been using the very same words to describe them. For example, at Bach’s time what people meant when talking about ‘music’ was obviously different from what Beethoven’s contemporaries indicated with the same word. Accordingly, Lydia Goehr (2007) has contended that the modern ‘work-concept’ – the concept of the multiply instanceable musical work – didn’t have any ‘regulative force’ in the musical practice before the nineteenth-century, in the sense that it did not shape how music was viewed at that time. In the same way, one can argue that the use of the term ‘musical work’ has changed after Cage’s 4’33”.¹³

More generally, the issue is that if our beliefs, intentions and practices regarding the arts vary across time and space, then the insights they give us about ontological issues will vary accordingly; and this ultimately implies that our ontological description of the (art) world will change along with how we think and act. This variation, however, not only undermines the claim that our ways of talking and thinking may provide us with stable knowledge of ontological facts, but also exposes descriptivism to the risk of cultural relativism. The point is tricky, since evidence of cultural and historical variation cannot be denied. Thus, either one simply foregoes descriptivism or one has to assume that the ontological truth about the thing referred to by our musical discourse changes when the use of language changes. But then one has also to face the following: that people in different epochs or cultures are really speaking about ‘different things’ when they refer to works of music, so the very possibility of a mutual understanding needs to be explained.

3.2 Inconsistency of Intuitions

If the argument for variation were the only challenge to descriptivism, however, one would not need to be too concerned. Differences in intuitions may indeed be cause for some concern, but they do not strike descriptivism at its heart.¹⁴ A much more problematic issue for descriptivism tackles the intrinsic conflict

¹³ Though whether Cage’s piece can properly count as a musical work is debatable (see: Davies, 1997).

¹⁴ Indeed, our ontological categories themselves may be thought as dynamic, arbitrary, unsystematic and so on, in ways that reflect these features of the intuitions. This consideration may eventually lead philosophers to embrace an

between our intuitions in a certain domain. People normally have conflicting intuitions, intuitions that are mutually inconsistent and contradictory; just think of intuitions about, say, which party is going to win an election, or what the chances are that next winter will be warmer than the past one, and the like.

In the artistic domain as well, our intuitions are often chaotic and inconsistent. Musical practice looks realistically more like a jungle of muddled actions and opinions than a well-ordered landscape of shared judgments and attitudes from which to draw any consistent evidence. Expert people, i.e. professional musicians, practitioners and critics, are far from possessing a common set of ideas when it comes to the use of the relevant concepts. No easy consensus is to be found in their ‘ordinary discourses’; at least none that supplies us with clear and consistent answers to our philosophical problem. Therefore, when one tries to answer ontological questions by examining musical practices, what one gets are a number of different and mutually contradictory intuitive answers.

The case of musical ontologists is paradigmatic here. Different philosophers, mostly based on their individual intuitions, have varying ideas about what the ontological category of musical works is, ideas that are incompatible and sometimes irreconcilable. As we have seen, some claim that musical works are abstract types that exist for all time, unchanging in their constitutive properties, and therefore are merely discovered by their composers (Wolterstorff, 1980; Kivy, 1983; Dodd, 2000; 2007). Others find this position unsustainable, and in particular see the ‘eternalist’ consequence to be deeply unintuitive (Levinson, 1980; 1990). Significantly, both claims have been argued for on the grounds that they satisfy our intuitions about the distinction between work and performance (Bartel, 2017, p. 349). But if even the philosophers’ intuitions provide different answers at different times, then how can we trust the reliability of intuitions? The contradictory nature of intuitions, in other words, puts into question the very idea that they may represent something comparable to perception for guiding us to what is real, outside of our mental and linguistic structures. Indeed, if intuitions were a kind of ‘perception’ of ontological facts, or if they were *bona fide* reflections, objective mental representations of ontological data – judgments governed by norms of truth and validity – we probably won’t disagree so often about which ones are true.

3.3 Triviality of Intuitions

A third, broader, concern for descriptivism addresses the way in which it *uses* musical intuitions to build up an ontological theory. Even granted that intuitions represent a reliable source from which to draw our data, if, according to descriptivism, ontological investigations must confine themselves to *mirror* these data, then it is difficult to understand what kind of knowledge about musical phenomena they are to attain. In other words, in the descriptivist practice, we cannot obtain by means of an ontological inquiry any knowledge about the nature of musical works which is *additional to*, or simply *different from*, the knowledge already contained in our intuitions concerning musical practice. An ontology driven by a descriptive commandment – one aimed to describe, in Kania’s terms, the ‘structure of our thought’, looks ultimately unable to account for any of the things it is meant to account for, namely the nature and role of artworks in artistic practices. Since descriptivist theories are not pretending to reflect reality in any objective way, but only to ratify how we conceive it, all of what they left us with is a report of what we say, our *façon de parler* of the artistic world.

For example, one might think that one contribution ontology could make to our musical knowledge is to help us clarify puzzle cases, i.e. cases in which our intuitions about one aspect of the practice are vague or

ontological historicism, in the sense of Ian Hacking (2004), that testifies to the complexity of the phenomena under examination (see: Giombini, 2017, pp. 255–260).

ambiguous – alleged instances of copyright infringement, for instance, where there is disagreement about how much one can copy a musical work without committing plagiarism. Admittedly, however, descriptivism cannot bring us any closer to whatever ontological ‘truth’ there is to know in these cases, since it can only ratify the ambiguity of our intuitions, as reflected in the practice. But if descriptivism only tells us what we already know, its intellectual contribution to the study of musical phenomena is trifling, at best – then why should one engage in ontological investigations altogether? Descriptivist methodology, thus, leaves the door open to deflationism, defined, as mentioned before, as the view that ontology is in the end a ‘worthless’ enterprise: “*An incredible amount of effort and ingenuity has been invested in trying to find the one true ontology of musical works. It has been wasted*” (Young, 2011, p. 297).

4. Reflective Equilibrium: a Possible Strategy?

Scepticism about intuition as a reliable source of ontology, together with concerns about the trifling results obtained by descriptivist approaches to musical ontology, may lead one to give up on such methodology altogether. This conclusion, however, might be hasty. It can indeed be argued that the last section presents a too rough interpretation of descriptivism, and that a more refined version of it might in fact be able to mitigate, if not resolve, the problems highlighted.

So what would this version be like? Ideally, this should be an account that enables one to revise the contradictory consequences of ‘simple’ descriptivism, while holding fast to its main premise, i.e., the primacy given to actual musical practice. In other words, since there are many mutually incompatible claims about the nature of art and musical works, and no less disagreement about pre-theoretical intuitions, what one needs is a procedure for determining *which* intuitions to give up and *which* to hold on to. To put it simply, what is required is a strategy for selecting which intuitions and claims to treat as central and which to consider marginal, and to justify those choices.

A possible solution in this sense is a method originally developed in the context of philosophical ethics by John Rawls (1971), who also coined the term, namely, *reflective equilibrium*. Rawls identifies the method in the work of Nelson Goodman and notes that it is not limited to social and political philosophy: Goodman for instance uses it to evaluate competing theories of deductive and inductive logic (Goodman, 1955, pp. 65–68). What’s more, according to Rawls, we can retrospectively find usage of the method throughout the history of philosophy: he suggests that it goes as far back as Aristotle.

4.1 The Method

As a procedure, reflective equilibrium can be considered in analogy with the scientific method: we aim at building a theory that is able to fit with the relevant data together. But while for the scientific method the data are empirical observations, perceptions, and the like, for reflective equilibrium the data are our pre-theoretic intuitions, what are called, in Rawls’ terms, “considered judgments”. Considered judgments can be conceived of as judgments that, according to Rawls, we make “intuitively”, yet “with the greatest confidence” (Rawls, 1971, p. 42). An example in aesthetics could be Levinson’s ‘most entrenched belief’ that musical works are created.

Roughly, the method dictates that one should work back-and-forth between one’s considered judgments on the one hand and plausible general principles on the other hand. ‘Working back and forth’ entails taking into examination various intuitions to revise, adjust or filter out those of them which turn out to be based on prejudice and inferential error. The process succeeds when we arrive at an acceptable level of

coherence among the judgments that have stood up under rational examination, or that have been: “duly pruned and adjusted” (Rawls, 1971, p. 20) on the basis of theoretical principles such as coherence, simplicity, plausibility and the like. Reflective equilibrium represents thus both the *final goal* and the *process* by which we reflect on and revise our beliefs concerning an area of inquiry. One central point is that only after having been carefully selected, adjusted and mutually calibrated can our pre-theoretical intuitions assume theoretical relevance. Relevantly, indeed, no claim within the procedure is immune from revision. This does not imply, however, that any belief is equally susceptible to the same amount of revision. Intuitions that, for instance, enjoy a great many connections to many of our other intuitions are revisable, but demand parallel revision of a vast number of inferentially related beliefs. On the other hand, intuitions that have few connections to other intuitions are especially vulnerable (Daniels, 2013). Moreover, intuitions need not only be consistent with each other, but also provide support or justification for other intuitions. Eventually, the judgments obtained from this process can form the backbone of a theory, but the method can also be used to select between competing theories that exhibit greater or lesser degrees of coherence with our considered judgments.

Though the breadth of application of this method is observable in many different domains of contemporary philosophy, only recently has it started to attract critical attention on the part of philosophers of art.¹⁵ One interesting example of how the method of reflective equilibrium can be fruitfully adopted in ontology of art comes from D. Davies (2004; 2009; 2017). Davies famously articulates this methodology in what he calls ‘pragmatic constraint’: “*Artworks must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed ‘works’ in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such ‘works’ are or would be individuated, and that have the modal properties that are reasonably ascribed to ‘works,’ in that practice*” (Davies, 2004, p. 18).

In accordance with a descriptivist perspective, Davies maintains that the main concern of art ontology should be to account for our art-related practices. Theoretical claims about the ontology of art and music must be *constrained* by features of our creative and appreciate practices: “*It is our practice that has primacy and that must be foundational for our ontological endeavors, because it is our practice that determines what kinds of properties, in general, artworks must have*” (Davies, 2009, p. 162). However, according to Davies, it is not the whole bunch of our existing intuitions about artistic practice that is supposed to play such a determining role in ontology, but only those intuitions that “turn out to be acceptable *upon reflection*” (Davies, 2017, p. 120). We should only look at those intuitions governing the practice “that would *survive ‘rational reflection’*” (Davies, 2004, p. 20 *my emph.*). Before they can be used as constrain to ontological theorizing, intuitions must thus be duly pruned and adjusted. This process of steady calibration and adjustment, according to Davies, is a priority for any ontological investigation: reflection has indeed to precede, warrant and establish the inquiry. Only after rational reflection has confirmed that certain properties are rightly ascribed to what are called ‘works’ in a certain artistic practice, can we derive a conclusion about the ontological nature of artworks (Davies, 2004, p. 23).

4.2. Application to Descriptivism

Relevantly, thus, Davies’ approach conjoins the descriptivist’s plea for the primacy of practice with a method akin to Rawls’ reflective equilibrium. Accepting his methodological proposal, on the other hand, might help descriptivists overcome some of the difficulties implicit in their view. Here are some of the reasons why I think this might be the case.

¹⁵ Among these, see: Gracyk (2008), and Cooke (2012).

In the first place, embracing reflective equilibrium implies that one acknowledges the possibility that aspects of our intuitions about artistic and musical practices can be at least partially revised. This means that the descriptivists get rid with the idea that *all* our intuitions regarding musical practice are to be taken as indispensable or sacrosanct or unrevisable, and that they *all* deserve to find a place in our ontology. By contrast, while recourse to intuition is maintained, one should learn to use it cautiously, and subject it to rational scrutiny and examination. To this extent, when conflicting intuitions can be justified only through extremely difficult theorizing, it might be best to sacrifice a few of them for the sake of the consistency of the whole theory. In these cases, non-ontological intuitions can also be used to adjudicate between rival ontologies of musical works.

Consider for example the ‘identification debate’ over what kinds of aesthetic or artistic properties are essential for a musical work’s identity. The sonicists’ intuition is that only notational aspects are essential, so changes in instrumentation do not affect the work’s identity (Kivy, 1988). Instrumentalists, on the other hand, assume that since musical works are largely determined by their context of creation, they have to be performed using the original instruments indicated by the composer (Levinson, 1990). The former argue that individuating musical works must only take into account what is prescribed for correct performances by the score, since all the relevant properties to be grasped in aesthetic appreciation depend upon the manifest properties of the artistic product, say, the perceptible properties of the sound-sequence that complies with the composer’s specification. The latter, on the other hand, reply that any proper assessment of the work depends on these properties being accurately complemented by consideration of the medium employed in their production, i.e., the kind of instrument used to produce the sound-sequence, the concert hall etc.

Both accounts, as it happens, rely on consistent assumptions and have sound arguments to support their intuitions. If musical ontology were to salvage *all* these opposing intuitions as indispensable, each with its own specific demands, this would generate a very awkward account of the identity of musical works. In this case, reflective equilibrium may lead one to adopt a theory that might conflict with some of the assumptions we started with, regarding our underlying understanding of musical practice. Alternatively, it may lead one to resolve the conflict by giving up on the search for a single unified theory to account for all our intuitions. Conflicting intuitions can indeed be the result of different generative contexts and traditions. For example, as noted by S. Davies (2001), while the sonicist assumption works well for baroque oeuvres, whose instrumentation is flexible *by definition*, the instrumentalist idea is best exemplified by Romantic symphonies where instrumentation is explicitly specified by the composer. Sometimes, thus, reflective equilibrium may suggest that we see what is distinctive about particular cases and revise or refine our intuitions and principles before we arrive at a consistent understanding. Other times it may indicate that we cannot resolve disputes unless we bring more theoretical considerations to bear. In all situations however, a thoughtful process of reflection is needed before any intuition can be considered in our ontology.

Secondly, and relatedly, adopting reflective equilibrium also has an impact on the type of knowledge that is achievable by means of descriptivist ontological theorizing. This is because the method carries along an intrinsically normative constrain. As a *rationalizing procedure* for our intuitions, reflective equilibrium entails, as Davies puts it, “*an essentially normative, and not merely descriptive, relationship to the norms that operate in actual critical practice and the judgments in accordance with those norms that we actually make*” (Davies, 2004, p. 20). The normative character of reflective equilibrium, in turn, provides descriptivism with some tools to escape the ‘deflationist flattery’. Indeed, by acknowledging some degree of revision, adjustment and calibration in our

nascent conception of artistic practice, we end up with a knowledge that is not just trifle codification of the already-known. This also has implications for the assessment criteria of ontological theories, for it suggests that the best proposals on the table are not necessarily those that most comply with our intuitive conception of musical and artistic practices *simpliciter*, but those which give us the most rationally consistent justification of why and how people think about art phenomena the way they do.

More generally, once revised through the lenses of reflective equilibrium, descriptivism guarantees that the ontological accounts it validates are *substantive*, that is, that they achieve what some authors consider the major goal of art and musical ontology: to provide us with an adequate *reflective explanation* (Davies, 2017, p. 126) of the practices – production, reception, interpretation, evaluation, commodification – to which our intuitive conception refers. Reflective explanation means, in this context, “*an accurate systematic picture of the artworld, making explicit the norms sustained therein: norms that govern recognition, evaluation, and interpretation of artistic objects and events*” (Kraut, 2014, p. 3). Relevantly, we explain “*by adverting to the sorts of things artworks are*” for “*their ontological status explains why they are, or ought to be treated, in one way rather than another*” (Kraut, 2014, p. 5). It is vital to see that such explanations are not merely in the business of ‘conceptual analysis’ – ratifying or codifying our ‘conceptual scheme’ – but in the business of *accounting for* the artistic phenomena of our interest; there is more to a rational reconstruction of this sort than merely attesting to what ‘real’ people do or think. In this picture, ontology is in the business of shaping “*a theoretical background against which properly aesthetic questions can be addressed, one permitting the formulation of a wide variety of views and arguments, precisely that dizzy variety of claims that constitute our artistic practices*” (Rohrbaugh, 2013, p. 239). And this implies in the first place attempting to find rational grounds for our judgments by means of that continual process of examination of concepts and intuitions that goes by the name of reflective equilibrium.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have made a case for reflective equilibrium as a methodology able to overcome some of the problems faced by standard descriptivism in art and musical ontology. On the one hand, involving a process of adjustment and revision of intuitions, reflective equilibrium may help descriptivists address the instability of intuitions as ontological evidence. On the other hand, by introducing a normative dimension into ontological theorizing, it may grant that the resulting theories achieve explanatory power with regard to our art and musical practices.

One could argue, however, that it remains unclear in what sense the intuitions retained by the descriptivist are ‘intuitive’ at all (Bartel, 2017, p. 351). In other words, to *whom* are these claims intuitive? Rather than reflecting actual musical practice, the intuitions used by ontologists might in fact turn out to be the product of their philosophical commitments (Bartel, 2017, p. 364).

This may be indicative of a more general problem for descriptivism (see: Williamson, 2007, pp. 244–246). Even if reflective equilibrium were ultimately proven to be a suitable methodology for musical and art ontology (which would clearly require more study than can be carried out in the extent of a single paper), this in no way would contribute to justifying the epistemic reliability of intuitions, whose philosophical reputation remain questionable. In other words, what guarantees that the outcome of such a process of steady calibration and adjustment would be nothing other than an internally consistent set of false prejudices?

I reply by agreeing with the premise that clarifying the function of intuitions in the ontology of art and music – and philosophy in general – is crucial. Until light is shed on the epistemic status of the class of

judgments that are part of the method of reflective equilibrium – that is, until one has specified what kind of evidence intuitions provide – there could be no definitive basis for assessing the reliability of the method in question.

Nevertheless, even in the absence of such a theory, reflective equilibrium should not be discarded as arbitrary. Precisely because only some of our intuitions can be trusted, while other cannot, so that we can easily mistake a biased intuition for a trustworthy one, we *need* a method that help us rationally reconstruct our beliefs and intuitive judgments and their logical interconnections. Reflective equilibrium might thus be the philosophical equivalent of finding a smooth curve through the disparate and disordered data points that constitute our artistic practices. I trust everyone understands the difference between merely joining the dots and trying to figure out a pattern behind them.

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