Abstract: In virtue of what is a work of art complete? In this paper we argue that an artwork is complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work – a disposition sustained by certain cognitive mechanisms to refrain from making further changes to the work in normal circumstances. We begin by explaining why the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to artworks is both practically and philosophically significant. Then we consider and reject two approaches to artwork completion. Next we set forth our conception of completion dispositions, consider the application of our account to paradigmatic cases of complete and incomplete artworks, and offer a general diagnosis of putative counterexamples to our account. After responding to two putative counterexamples that fall outside the scope of our general diagnosis, we conclude with a brief discussion of the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works.

1. Introduction

In virtue of what is a work of art complete? In this paper we argue that an artwork is complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work – a disposition sustained by certain cognitive mechanisms to refrain from making further changes to the work in normal circumstances. In other words, if an artwork is complete, then an artist having such a disposition fully grounds the fact that the work is complete.

The plan for the paper is as follows. First, we explain why the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to artworks is both practically and philosophically significant. Second, we consider and reject two approaches to artwork completion, one that focuses on observable properties of artworks, and the other on judgments to the effect that artworks are complete. Third, we set forth our conception of completion dispositions, consider the application of our account to paradigmatic cases of complete and incomplete artworks, and offer a general diagnosis of putative counterexamples to our account. Fourth, we consider and respond to two putative counterexamples involving collaborative artworks and multiple versions of the same work that fall outside the scope of our general diagnosis. Fifth, we argue that the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works is also philosophically significant and propose that a philosophical work is complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the author has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work.

2. The importance of the issue

Why should we care about the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to works of art? First of all, the distinction has practical significance in the world of art. It figures, for example, within intellectual property legislation in many national jurisdictions (see Adeney 2006 for a broad survey). The legal category
of ‘derivative’ works depends on the category of previously completed works, those works on which derivative works are based. In ordinary circumstances, a work is to be displayed or distributed in its completed condition, and doing otherwise can constitute a violation of the artist or author’s rights. What is more, testimony indicates that many (but not all) artists are strongly interested in the distinction between complete and incomplete works. They report that they are trying to finish a work, for example, or proudly declare that they have done so. To eliminate the distinction would require a radical revision of entrenched legal, curatorial, and other art-related practices.

The distinction is philosophically significant in part because it connects with other issues of interest in aesthetics, particularly that of artistic appreciation. Briefly, artistic appreciation is the contemplation or careful examination of a work, where the appreciator’s primary interest is the work’s artistic value. A key desideratum of artistic appreciation is the contemplative and evaluative grasp of the organization of the parts within the artwork, or what, following Alberti (1486/1988), may be called the work’s design (cf. Sparshott 1982). Such traditional aesthetic and artistic norms as proportion, harmony, and unity-in-multiplicity clearly involve part-whole relations. These are relations that depend upon the artist’s determination of a unit of analysis, parts of which have some kind of aesthetic or artistic role within the work as a whole. There can be no experience of the artwork as a discrete and intended, appreciable whole unless the work is complete. Hence, it’s constitutive of artistic appreciation that its overall aim is the appreciation of complete artworks. It follows that to clarify the nature of artwork completion is to further clarify the nature and object of artistic appreciation.

3. How not to think about artwork completion

In this section we set out and criticize two approaches to artwork completion. These approaches attempt to identify substantive necessary and sufficient conditions for an artwork to be complete. In particular, they aim to identify necessary conditions the satisfaction of which would fully ground (and hence suffice for) the fact that a work is complete. The first understands artwork completion in terms of observable properties of artworks, and the second does so in terms of certain judgments made by artists. This discussion sets the stage for our view, which we present in the next section.

3.1. Observable properties

Consider the thesis that, if an artwork is complete, it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that it possesses observable properties that meet certain artistic or aesthetic standards. Here is a counterexample to the claim that having such observable properties is sufficient for an artwork to be complete. Imagine two configurations of old stones that are indiscernible with respect to their observable properties. The first is the well-preserved remains of a

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1 For a general discussion of grounding, see Trogdon (forthcoming-a) and the references contained therein. See Trogdon (forthcoming-b) for an argument to the effect that, if one fact fully grounds another, then any metaphysically possible world in which the former obtains is a world in which the latter obtains. The upshot is that full grounds modally suffice for what they ground.
Romanesque chapel, the construction of which was interrupted and never finished. The second is a well-preserved Romantic ruin or fragment, erected in the 18th century in order to lend an antique je ne sais quoi to the patron’s garden. Given that the artworks in these cases share their observable properties, it’s a trivial matter that their observable properties meet the same artistic or aesthetic standards. Yet these artworks differ in whether they’re complete; the first pile of stones is an incomplete work, while the second is a complete work, one designed to look like it’s damaged.²

This case suggests that a better account of artwork completion would take into account certain facts concerning the artist. For it seems crucial to the status of the first pile of stones as an incomplete work that something prevented the workers from finishing their task (that of implementing the artist’s plan), and crucial to the status of the second pile of stones as a complete work is the fact that the workers finished their task (that of implementing a different artistic plan). If observable properties are intrinsic properties, the upshot of the discussion so far is this: it’s not the case that an artwork is complete wholly in virtue of having various intrinsic properties; instead, an artwork is complete at least partly in virtue of how it’s related to wholly distinct objects. So it seems that in this case the property being complete is instantiated partly in virtue of certain extrinsic properties. On certain views of intrinsicality (e.g. Witmer et al 2005), it follows that being complete is itself an extrinsic property.

3.2. Completion judgments

You might think that, if the status of an artwork as complete isn’t ultimately a matter of the work’s intrinsic nature, it must ultimately be a matter of the artist judging that the work is complete. Proposal: if an artwork is complete, it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has judged that the work is complete. Here is a simple counterexample to the claim that an artist judging that her work is complete is sufficient for it to be complete. Suppose that a film director, cowed by a dictator’s deadly threats, allows that her work is done. But years later when the director manages to gain control of the work she finishes it. A natural reading of this case is that the work wasn’t complete when the coerced artist initially decided that it was complete. Similar considerations apply to completion judgments arrived at via non-rational belief forming processes (e.g. bumps on the head).

With this counterexample in mind, you might propose that, if an artwork is complete, it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has made a certain type of completion judgment – a reflective and uncoerced decision to the effect that her work is complete. A counterexample to the claim that an artist’s reflective and uncoerced judgment that her work is complete is sufficient for the work to be complete is as follows. Having decided that The Raft of the Medusa was done, Géricault had the enormous canvas removed from

² This contrast also clearly illustrates the relevance of the complete/incomplete distinction to artistic appreciation. The appreciator of the fragmentary building has to try to imagine what the overall design of the work would have been had the artist managed to finish it. The appreciator of the finished, ‘Romantic’ fragment pursues other questions, such as how well the configuration of stones mimics the remains of an ancient temple.
his studio and delivered to the foyer of the building where it was to be exhibited. Yet shortly thereafter he took another look at the canvas, went back on his decision, and made significant changes to the composition. A natural interpretation of this case is that the work wasn’t complete when Géricault made his initial completion judgment, despite the fact that his decision was reflective and uncoerced.

Moreover, there are counterexamples to the claim that such a judgment is necessary for artwork completion as well. Imagine that an artist, untrammelled by any general conception of work completion, could generate a drawing, find it to her liking, and move on to something else, effectively refraining from making any further changes to the picture, but without having consciously thought that the work was finished. Apparently Picasso said, with regard to Guernica, that he did not know whether it was finished or not, but that it could be taken away to be exhibited at the World’s Fair in Paris. It’s natural to say that the work really was complete, even if Picasso’s remark was sincere. And suppose that an artist stops working on a piece but she doesn’t have any settled belief about whether her work is finished due to uncertainty about whether she is capable of improving it or of bringing it to some desired level of perfection. The artist believes that unforeseeable motivational shifts might take place, and this belief leads to uncertainty with regard to her own future actions and decisions. It seems that the artwork might be complete in this case, despite the absence of a reflective and uncoerced completion judgment.

4. How to think about artwork completion

If the two approaches to artwork completion discussed above are false, what does artwork completion come down to? A first pass at our account is this: if an artwork is complete, it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has acquired a certain disposition – a completion disposition – with respect to her work. In this section we describe our conception of completion dispositions, consider the application of our account to paradigmatic cases of complete and incomplete artworks, and offer a general diagnosis of potential counterexamples to our account.

4.1. Completion dispositions

A completion disposition is a disposition sustained by certain cognitive mechanisms to refrain from making further changes to a work in normal circumstances. Three questions arise. Why the appeal to normal conditions? What is it to manifest a completion disposition? What sorts of cognitive mechanisms sustain completion dispositions? We consider each question in turn.

Suppose for the moment that our proposal is correct: if an artwork is complete, it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that the artist has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work. Were the relevant disposition

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3 In the next section we revise our account of artwork completion to take into account complete collaborative artworks; this is why the characterization above is only a “first pass.”
to refrain from making additional changes *period* (no matter the circumstances), our proposal would be vacuous, for presumably no artist has ever had such a disposition. It seems that for any artist there are conditions under which she is disposed to make changes to her work, regardless of how developed the work might be. Here we have in mind cases of extreme coercion: “continue to work or we will bomb the Louvre!” So a completion disposition is not a disposition to refrain from making further changes *period*, but a disposition to refrain from making changes in certain circumstances, *normal* circumstances. We don’t have an analysis of what it is for a circumstance to be a normal circumstance, but then no one else does either. That we lack an analysis of normality doesn’t stop us from taking talk of dispositions in general seriously, so it shouldn’t stop us from taking completion dispositions seriously either.

Now we turn to the issue of manifesting completion dispositions. What we’d like to point out here is that refraining from making additional changes to an artwork isn’t a mysterious “negative action”. To refrain is intentionally to do something that precludes the undertaking of the action from which one intends to refrain (Wilson 1989). The intention to refrain is successfully realized when one performs actions that preclude any intentional accomplishment of the refrained-from action. For example, to refrain from revising a picture, the artist sends it to the dealer and goes on holiday, or takes up some other projects that will stand in the way of further thinking about how to improve the picture. These actions have the overall result of the artist’s not making any further changes to the picture. In contrast, the artist whose progress was definitively interrupted by a heart attack or aneurism has not, by the same stroke, refrained from making additional changes to the work.

Finally, we turn to the cognitive mechanisms in virtue of which artists have completion dispositions. In §43 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes the product of art – an *opus* – from the effects of nature, his example of the latter being the honeycombs produced by bees. The basis of Kant’s distinction between natural effects and human works is the artist’s capacity for choice (what Kant calls *eine Willkür*); it’s this capacity, he says, that grounds the artist’s actions in reason and qualifies the result as a work. A slogan for Kant’s idea here could be “no reasons, no work.”

Taking a page from Kant, completion dispositions are grounded in certain cognitive mechanisms, specifically rational capacities of artists consisting of various beliefs, desires, and further cognitive dispositions. The general idea is that when an artist has a completion disposition with respect to her work, she is disposed to refrain from making changes to the work in virtue of having exercised her capacity to reason about art in a certain way. The artist’s rational capacity in this case includes, for example, beliefs about which configurations of observable properties have artistic or aesthetic value, the desire to create objects of artistic or aesthetic value, the disposition to cease working on projects once certain artistic or aesthetic standards are met, and so on.

We’ve given some examples of mental states that play a sustaining role with respect to completion dispositions, but what sorts of mental states aren’t candidates for playing this role? Two examples are as follows. First, consider the belief that the work is to be abandoned as incomplete. Such a belief, of
course, isn’t a candidate for being a part of a sustaining mechanism for a completion disposition. Second, consider a case of extreme coercion in which one desires to avoid serious threatened consequences. Such a desire isn’t a candidate either. This is because sustaining mechanisms that have such desires as components interfere with the artist’s reasons; the desire to avoid the threatened consequences eclipses other, properly artistic reasons in the coerced artist’s mind.

4.2. Application

Above we proposed a substantive necessary and sufficient condition for an artwork to be complete. In this section we begin by considering paradigmatic cases in which informed appreciators take it as uncontroversial that certain artworks are incomplete, and paradigmatic cases in which informed appreciators take it as uncontroversial that certain artworks are complete. Our account of artwork completion handles these cases correctly, and this shows that it’s worth taking seriously.

No one doubts that Bruce Lee failed to finish the film he had provisionally entitled ‘Game of Death’, since during its making he died of cerebral edema (at the age of 32), and so was not around to bring about its completion. Orson Welles never finished his Don Quixote adaptation, not only because he encountered financial obstacles, but also because he kept changing his mind about what sort of film he wanted to make. First conceived in 1955, Welles worked on the project on and off for decades, and it remained ‘in progress’ when Welles died in 1985. This case illustrates how a habit of revision precludes settling firmly on a plan, working consistently to realize that plan, and eventually becoming satisfied with one’s results and acquiring the disposition to refrain from making any more changes in normal circumstances. So here we have two paradigmatic cases of incomplete works. Since neither artist acquired completion dispositions with respect to his work, our account classifies each of them as incomplete works, as it should. (We assume that, if a work isn’t complete, it’s incomplete.)

In contrast to these cases of incompletion, we have Ingmar Bergman’s expression of certainty regarding the successful completion of his 1980 film, Aus dem Leben der Marionetten. In December of 1979 the director proudly wrote in his personal copy of the shooting script that he had “made a disgusting, distressing, unpleasant, strange and grey film” and that he was “glad” to have done so. Bergman’s declaration is best explained by the hypothesis that he had acquired a completion disposition with regard to his work. Such an inference finds additional support in various other relevant actions of his, and most notably, his leaving the work unchanged, his agreeing to its public distribution, and his pursuit of other projects, including Funny and Alexander and a Munich staging of Hedda Gabler. So here we have a paradigmatic case of a complete work. And it seems that our account classifies Aus dem Leben der Marionetten as a complete work, for it seems that Bergman acquired a completion disposition in 1979.

In many cases, of course, the available evidence relevant to an author’s actual dispositions does not line up so neatly. Critics have long disagreed, for example,
over the completion status of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Wayne C. Booth (1951) allows that some of the writer’s early proclamations suggest that he had the intention of adding indefinitely to this sprawling, multi-volume project. Yet Booth points to evidence to the effect that in writing the ninth and last published volume of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne grew tired of the work and made the decision to bring it to a close. Unlike the other previously published installments, this final volume included no new elements of suspense that might incite readers to buy and read further installments. Various other features of the final published volume also support the conclusion that it was intended as the concluding part of the work. That Sterne stopped working on the comic novel and turned his mind to the writing of four volumes of *A Sentimental Journey* suggests that he acquired a completion disposition with regard to *Tristram Shandy*. Other critics (e.g. Brissenden 1971) reject Booth’s conclusion, however, defending the idea that the author had committed himself to an endlessly expandable project. This hypothesis is, however, hard to square with the fact that the author effectively refrained from writing any further volumes for this work. So we think that considerations on balance suggest that *Tristram Shandy* is a complete work, and it seems that our account of work completion classifies it as such.\(^4\)

To conclude this section we offer a general diagnosis of potential counterexamples to our account of artwork completion. We begin with cases in which it seems that an artist has a completion disposition with respect to her work yet the work is incomplete. We suspect that such cases will normally fall into one of two innocuous categories. First, such cases may be ones in which the artist’s disposition to refrain from making additional changes to her work lacks the appropriate cognitive sustaining mechanisms. Perhaps the disposition is sustained by desires brought about by extreme coercion, the belief that the work is hopeless and to be abandoned as incomplete, or some non-rational neurological disposition-forming mechanism. In such cases the sufficient condition identified by our account isn’t met, first impressions aside.

Second, such cases may be ones in which the artist has a completion disposition with respect to her work, yet the work doesn’t satisfy some artistic or aesthetic norm imposed by a critic or appreciator. In such cases it seems that the work is incomplete because we’re conflating the category of artworks of which we disapprove with the category of works that the artist never finished (as when Ruskin, for example, derisively said paintings exhibited by Whistler were “unfinished”). Critics and editors who think of completion as depending upon the satisfaction of their own artistic desiderata get the order of

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\(^4\) Returning to the importance of the complete/incomplete distinction we discussed earlier, critics who line up on either side of this question do not doubt that the answer to the question of completion is of critical significance. It matters to them whether the book is an uncontrolled “hodge podge,” a “salmagundi of odds and ends recklessly compounded,” or, on the contrary, a finished work having an overall shape as well as an appropriate resolution or closure (Booth 1951). Even more important is the critics’ implicit and pervasive convergence with regard to the object of their disagreement. Features of the text (so-called ‘internal evidence’) as well as external evidence such as the author’s written statements in letters or diaries, are sifted with reference to what they indicate concerning the author’s state of mind with regard to the status and design of the project, or what we call the completion disposition.
determination backwards. So our take on these cases is that the sufficient condition identified by our account is indeed satisfied, the artworks in question are complete, and the appearance that they’re incomplete can be explained away.

Now we turn to cases in which it seems that the artist lacks a completion disposition with respect to her work yet the work is complete. We suspect that these cases are normally ones in which it seems that the artwork is complete because we’re conflating the category of works of which we approve with the category of complete works. That the two completed movements of Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony” are very compleat, for example, does not guarantee that the artist was really finished with the work. To think of an incomplete artwork or fragment thereof ‘as if’ it had been completed or were part of a complete work can be viable and rewarding, but this must be kept distinct from whether the work is actually complete. So our take on these cases is that the necessary condition identified by our account isn’t met and the appearance that the relevant works are nonetheless complete can be explained away.

5. Objections

In this section we consider two putative counterexamples to our account that aren’t covered by our general diagnosis of putative counterexamples set out above. These cases challenge the idea that an artist’s having acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work is necessary for the work to be complete in particular.

5.1. Collaborative artworks

We begin with collaborative artworks (cf. Livingston and Archer 2010). Our account says that an artwork is complete only if \( \text{the artist} \) has a completion disposition with respect to her work. But what about cases in which two or more artists working in collaboration complete a work?\(^5\)

A simple revision of the account fixes the problem: if an artwork is complete, then it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact that any artist who created the work has acquired a completion disposition with respect to that work. (Here we assume that it’s necessary that, if \( w \) is an artwork, then some artist created \( w \).) In typical cases, the completion dispositions of collaborating artists are acquired and sustained by cognitive mechanisms that include mental states produced by their communicating about the status of the work. In less usual cases, collaborators merely settle on procedures the successful execution of which eventuates in the acquisition of completion dispositions (e.g. when the last artist in a pre-determined series makes her final contributions to the sketch or poem).

\(^5\) If collaborating artists collectively instantiate cognitive states, we could characterize collaborative artwork completion in terms of group-level completion dispositions. We’re inclined to think that the attribution of cognitive states to groups, however, doesn’t earn its explanatory keep; it doesn’t allow us to explain phenomena that we couldn’t otherwise explain by appealing to the cognitive states of the group’s members. As skeptics of group-level cognitive states, we put this avenue of response to the side.
Two points of clarification about the completion dispositions of collaborating artists are as follows. First, it seems that collaborative artworks can be complete in virtue of artists having completion dispositions even when the rational bases for these dispositions are importantly different. Consider, for example, artistic projects with a ‘wiki’ set-up in which the collaborators are anonymous and don’t communicate with one another in any detail about their artistic motivations and commitments. It seems plausible to say that collaborative artworks in such cases can be complete in virtue of the fact that the various collaborating artists have completion dispositions, ones sustained by cognitive mechanisms constituted by different sorts of beliefs, desires, and cognitive dispositions.

Second, while collaborative artworks can be complete in virtue of collaborating artists having completion dispositions with different sorts of rational bases, these rational bases must have certain similarities as well. A necessary condition for artists to count as collaborating on a artwork is that they take themselves to be engaging in a common project constituted by shared and mutually recognized plans or intentions. (This is true even in wiki-style cases; in such cases it’s just that the mutual plan or intention is relatively open-ended or general in nature.) Hence, if collaborating artists have completion dispositions with respect to their work, it seems that the cognitive mechanisms that sustain these dispositions must overlap to some degree; otherwise, the artists wouldn’t count as collaborators in the first place.

You might object that the revised proposal still faces a problem with an important type of artistic collaboration, what we’ll call de facto collaboration. An artwork is the product of de facto collaboration if artist A begins the work, fails to finish it, and another artist B comes along and undertakes to finish it, despite the fact that A doesn’t take herself to be engaging in a common project constituted by shared and mutually recognized plans or intentions. Certain types of posthumous collaboration are examples of de facto collaboration, such as Anthony Payne’s putative completion of Elgar’s Symphony No. 3. Cast in terms of this example, the objection to our account is that it wrongly classifies this complete work as incomplete, for Elgar never acquired a completion disposition with respect to the work.

Given the necessary condition for artistic collaboration we proposed above, our response is straightforward: ‘de facto collaboration’ is a misnomer; it isn’t genuine artistic collaboration. Returning to the Elgar and Payne example, Payne and Elgar did not collaborate in any literal sense, for Edgar didn’t take himself to be engaged in a common project with Payne consisting of shared and mutually recognized plans or intentions. Payne recruited Elgar’s fragment of a symphony to make something that is, qua completed work, entirely Payne’s doing. Our diagnosis of this case is that Elgar left us an incomplete work, and Payne went on to complete a new derivative artwork. (More on

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6 Another example: there are scads of divergent “continuations” of Dickens’ fragmentary novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, but no one of them should be taken as the completion of Dickens’ work; nor is there a work on which Dickens has collaborated with an open-ended series of writers.
derivative works in the next section.) Elgar’s work is incomplete because he didn’t acquire a completion disposition with respect to it, and Payne’s derivative work is complete because he did acquire a completion disposition with respect to it.7

5.2. Multiple versions of the same artwork

Stephen Davies provocatively claims that sometimes “a work’s composition can overshoot its completion” (2007, 79). According to Davies, “moderate” artistically significant post-completion changes to artworks bring about new “versions” of those works, where a version of a work isn’t a new derivative work (a new work modeled on an old work). Here’s how we understand this proposal. Suppose an artist completes a work w at time t1. Every complete artwork has at least one version, so there is a version, v1, of the work that exists at t1. At this time w is wholly located in one and only one region, wherever v1 is wholly located. Now suppose that the artist immediately goes on to make moderate post-completion artistic changes to w and finishes these changes at a later time t2. These changes issue a new version of w, v2. If v2 is the only version of w that exists at t2 then at that time w is wholly located in one and only one region, wherever v2 is wholly located. But if v1 still exists at t2, then w is multi-located at t2 in the sense that w is wholly located in distinct regions at that time (assuming that v1 and v2 aren’t wholly located in the same region). Davies claims that distinct versions of some types of artworks can exist at the same time (e.g. novels, plays, and musical works), while this is not the case for other types of artworks (e.g. certain types of paintings and sculptures). So we interpret Davies as allowing for the possibility that some types of artworks are multi-located.8

The objection to our account is this: if Davies’ proposal about versions of artworks is correct, then w is complete at t1 despite the fact that the artist

7 There are other types of cases that are naturally described as posthumous collaboration that are genuine cases of artistic collaboration. Suppose that artist A begins what she envisions as a collaborative work w with some artist B existing in the distant future. A begins w and leaves it unfinished along with detailed notes for how B might go about completing it. It seems possible for B to complete w, for, though A dies before B is born, they take themselves to be engaged in a common project constituted by shared and mutually recognized plans or intentions. Another interesting feature of this case is that it seems to show that an artist can acquire a completion disposition with respect to her work even if she believes that the work is incomplete. This is precisely how we see A from above – she acquires a completion disposition with respect to w even though she believes that w won’t be complete for a very long time, if ever. Our account says that w will be complete just in case B acquires a completion disposition with respect to w. In more common cases, the artist can acquire a completion decision with regard to a building or an “earthwork” the vehicle of which will require some natural process, such as erosion or the accumulation of rust, to acquire its desired finish.

8 It may be that Davies allows for the possibility that w is already multi-located at t1. Here we have in mind the idea that artworks not only are wholly located where their versions are wholly located, but they’re wholly located wherever their drafts are wholly located as well. Davies himself draws a parallel between drafts and versions: “Drafts are like versions, except they are made prior to the work’s completion” (2007, 82). We set aside this complication in what follows.
hasn’t acquired a completion disposition with respect to w. That the artist hasn’t acquired a completion disposition with respect to w is evidenced by her revisions to w, or so the objection goes.

So the question is whether Davies’ proposal is plausible.\(^9\) We don’t think so. Suppose that there is only one version \(v_1\) of musical work w at time \(t_1\). Suppose later the composer decides that w is too short, so she makes “moderate” post-completion changes to w by adding a refrain. She completes these changes at \(t_2\), which issues a new version of w, \(v_2\). Suppose that the refrain, however, contains hackneyed imagery. So now there are two versions of w: the new version, \(v_2\), which we will suppose has a certain flaw F, and the original version, \(v_1\), which lacks F. Suppose that appreciator \(a_1\) has viewed a performance of \(v_1\), appreciator \(a_2\) has viewed a performance of \(v_2\), and \(a_1\) and \(a_2\) meet to discuss w. Imagine that \(a_1\) utters, “\(v_2\) has F,” and in response \(a_1\) utters, “\(v_1\) lacks F.” Since \(v_1\) and \(v_2\) are the same work in the sense that w is wholly located wherever \(v_1\) is wholly located and w is wholly located wherever \(v_2\) is wholly located, it seems that in correctly attributing not-F to \(v_1\), \(a_1\) thereby correctly attributes not-F to w, and, in correctly attributing F to \(v_2\), \(a_2\) thereby correctly attributes F to w. Hence, it seems that Davies’s proposal allows for artworks to have incompatible properties. We reject the idea that artworks can have incompatible properties, and we think that Davies would as well.\(^{10}\)

In response to this objection, Davies might claim that one of the property attributions to a version of w must be false. But surely it’s possible for a version of w to have F and another to lack F. (Remember that the post-completion changes the composer made to w are “moderate,” so by Davies’ lights the change doesn’t issue a new derivative work.) Moreover, this avenue of response would commit Davies to postulating aesthetic disagreements where there are none. We take it as a datum that there are aesthetic disputes that involve genuine disagreement.\(^{11}\) But we also take it as a datum that the case above isn’t one of them – \(a_1\) and \(a_2\) wouldn’t take themselves to be in conflict here, and for \(a_2\) to respond to \(a_1\)’s response with a linguistic denial would be infelicitous. If one of their attributions must be false, however, their exchange does involve genuine disagreement.

\(^{9}\) You might reject Davies’ proposal because you reject multi-location \textit{inut} court. This isn’t an avenue we will pursue, given that the possibility of multi-location is taken seriously in the metaphysical literature (cf. Hudson 2001, Ch. 2; Saucedo 2011).

\(^{10}\) Why think that Davies rejects the idea that an artwork can have incompatible properties? Davies claims that interpretations attribute properties to artworks. What about cases in which it looks to an interpreter that a work w is both p and not-p? He critiques Margolis (1995) for saying such cases demonstrate the need to abandon classical logic; instead, the paradox can be shown to be “illusory,” for ‘w is p’ should be understood as ‘w can be read as p’: “There need be no difficulty in holding that one and the same work admits of a reading under which it is p and of another reading under which it is not-p, where both readings are ones the work will sustain. The appearance of contradiction in ‘[w] is p’ is the shorthand, common way of saying something a little more complicated” (1995, 9).

\(^{11}\) The impression that there is such disagreement, for example, is standardly taken to pose a prima facie problem for contextualist theories about aesthetic terminology (cf. Baker 2012 and the references contained therein).
A more promising response is to relativize the properties of w relevant to artistic appreciation to regions. Suppose that \(v_1\) is wholly located at region \(r_1\) and \(v_2\) is wholly located at region \(r_2\). In this case the idea is that, in claiming that \(v_1\) has not-\(F\), \(a_1\) isn’t thereby claiming that \(w\) has not-\(F\); instead, \(a_1\) is thereby claiming that \(w\) has being not-\(F\) in region \(r_1\). And in claiming that \(v_2\) has \(F\), \(a_2\) isn’t thereby claiming that \(w\) has \(F\); instead, \(a_2\) is thereby claiming that \(w\) has the property being \(F\) in region \(r_2\). One and the same work can have these relativized properties, so there is no problem involving the attribution of incompatible properties to \(w\). Another virtue of this proposal is that it doesn’t render the exchange between \(a_1\) and \(a_2\) discussed above as involving genuine disagreement. In making their non-relativized property attributions to \(v_1\) and \(v_2\), \(a_1\) and \(a_2\) are thereby attributing compatible relativized properties to \(w\).

This response, however, faces new problems. Suppose that \(v_1\) and \(v_2\) are the only versions of \(w\). \(w\), therefore, has exactly two versions, one of which \((v_1)\) we will suppose is better than the other \((v_2)\). That this is so should be compatible with \(w\) itself being as good as its best version, \(v_1\); after all, to point out that a work has a version that fails in certain ways isn’t to demonstrate that the work itself fails in any particular way. On the relativization proposal, however, it’s unclear how \(w\) could be as successful as its best version. This is because the properties of \(w\) relevant to artistic appreciation include properties defined partly in terms of properties indicative of artistic mistakes (being \(F\) in region \(r_1\) is defined partly in terms of \(F\)), while \(v_1\), we can imagine, fails to instantiate any property indicative of artistic mistakes. Here we seem to get the strange result that \(v_1\) is more successful than the work it’s a version of!

Given the problems with Davies’ proposal outlined above, we propose that cases of post-completion revision aren’t a matter of creating new versions of old artworks in Davies’ sense, but creating new, derivative works modeled on previously completed works. Davies agrees that certain sorts of artistically significant post-completion changes bring about new derivative works rather than new versions in his sense, so long as these changes are extensive. (According to Davies, translations and musical transcriptions involve extensive artistically significant post-completion changes, so a transcription of Schubert’s Die schöne Müllerin for voice and guitar is a distinct derivative work with respect to Die schöne Müllerin.) Our proposal is that artistically significant post-completion changes bring about new artworks, period.\(^{12}\) Consider, for example, Thomas Hardy’s novel entitled The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved, which was published as a weekly serial in The Illustrated London News and Harper’s Bazar in 1892. Hardy referred to this novel as “short and slight, and written entirely with a view to serial publication.” He went on to rework the novel and then publish a work entitled The Well-Beloved in 1897. If the differences between The Pursuit and The Well-Beloved are ‘moderate’ in his sense of the term, then for Davies the latter is a version of the former rather than a distinct derivative

\(^{12}\) Our view is that post-completion changes that aren’t artistically significant such as the correction of typographical errors, inconsistent spellings, and so on don’t issue new works. Hence, it is not such revisions that are the object of the refraining involved in completion dispositions.
work.\textsuperscript{13} We claim, on the other hand, that \emph{The Well-Beloved} is a distinct derivative work with respect to the \emph{The Pursuit}. We’re of course happy to call the former a ‘version’ of the latter, so long as this term is understood as a very imprecise label for many different sorts of derivative artworks, works based in different ways on anterior works.\textsuperscript{14}

We’re now in a position to return to the original objection to our account of artwork completion. Remember that the objection proceeds upon the idea that the artist in our original example hasn’t required a completion disposition with respect to her work \( w \), yet the work is nonetheless complete at time \( t_1 \). The evidence cited in support of the idea that she hasn’t acquired a completion disposition with respect to \( w \) is that she continues to revise \( w \) after \( t_1 \). Our response is to deny that she actually made changes to \( w \) after \( t_1 \). In our view she instead did various things that brought into existence a new, derivative artwork. Artistically significant post-completion changes to a work aren’t really changes to the work at all; instead, they’re actions whose goal is the completion of a derivate work, actions informed by what the artist has done previously in completing a different work.\textsuperscript{15} In this case we can say that the artist acquired two cognitive dispositions – a completion disposition with respect to \( w \), and a disposition to create a new artwork based on \( w \). If this is right, then our account classifies \( w \) as complete at \( t_1 \), as it should.\textsuperscript{16}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Differences between \emph{The Well-Beloved} and \emph{The Pursuit} include, for example, the fact that the former “scarcely dealt with marriage at all” and is “much more consistently a fable of the artistic temperament” (Millgate 2004, 354).

\textsuperscript{14} A final thought about Davies’ discussion. Davies lists several “signs” of work completion, no one of which is necessary to completion, but the conjunction of which is said to give us “a high level of confidence that the work is finished” (2007, 80). These conditions are (1) the artist has declared that the work is finished, (2) the score or catalogue indicates that the work is finished, (3) the score has been copied for performance, (4) a performance has been presented with the composer’s authorization as the work’s premiere, and (5) an authorized version of the score has been printed and sold. In our view, (1)-(5) constitute evidence to believe that the musical work is complete because (1)-(5) give us reasons to believe that the artist has a completion disposition with respect to her musical work. In other words, the truth of (1)-(5) gives us reasons to think that what our account identifies as a full ground of the completeness of the musical work obtains.

\textsuperscript{15} This, of course, isn’t to say that complete works are immutable. Obviously you can, for example, destroy a complete painting by coating it in paint thinner. Here we distinguish between internal changes with respect to an artwork (e.g. further developing the work) and external changes with respect to the work (e.g. destroying the work). So when we say that artistically significant post-completion changes to a work aren’t really changes to the work, we mean that they aren’t internal changes to that work in particular. Just what the distinction between internal and external changes to artworks comes to is an interesting matter, but not one that we have the space to pursue here. We think that the distinction is well understood enough for our present purposes.

\textsuperscript{16} Another objection concerning the application of our account worth considering is as follows. It is perfectly normal to say things like “This work is half finished” or “When Aeschylus was struck on the head by a turtle, he had almost finished his next tragedy.” The objection is that our account doesn’t provide grounds for such completion facts. But we don’t see this as a strike against our account. Talk of partially finished artworks refers to how works-in-progress stand in relation to certain artistic norms, such as an idea in the artist’s mind about the desired final shape of the work.
6. The completion of philosophical works

So far we have referred only to works of art. What about other sorts of works, such as philosophical ones? We think that completion dispositions ground the completeness of philosophical works as well: if a philosophical work is complete, then it’s complete wholly in virtue of the fact any philosopher who created the work has acquired a completion disposition with respect to that work. (Here we assume that it’s necessary that, if w is a philosophical work, some philosopher created w.) Defending this proposal falls outside the scope of this paper. So we will close by briefly addressing a related, prior issue, specifically why the complete/incomplete distinction with regard to philosophical works is philosophically significant in the first place.

You might argue that the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works is relatively unimportant by pointing to the following asymmetry with respect to how artists and philosophers approach the matter of revision. One of the artist’s central tasks is to create and present some distinct and finished item the organization of which constitutes the unit of appreciation (traditionally referred to by many philosophers as the “aesthetic object”). The artist completes something and submits it to others, hoping for their approval and admiration. If the artist fails, she does not normally go back and try to revise this particular work in keeping with the audience’s response; instead, she goes on and makes another new work. The corresponding task of the art appreciator is to scrutinize, contemplate, and evaluate the finished work as such.

As for the philosopher, what matters most is the pursuit of answers to philosophical questions. To that end, the philosopher issues an argument or a claim, hoping that others will either accept the argument/claim or give reasons why it is faulty. But making an irrevocable commitment to the success of a particular argument or the truth of a particular claim is not any part of the philosopher’s brief. The philosopher normally treats her arguments and claims as in principle defeasible. If others present telling criticisms of her arguments or claims, the only rational thing to do is to revise. So it seems that, while completion plays a central role in the art world, the same isn’t true for philosophy.

The problem with the argument above is that it doesn’t clearly distinguish between belief revision on the one hand and work revision on the other. Changing one’s philosophical views needn’t be accompanied by changing one’s philosophical works. Rationality might require that a philosopher recant a claim she makes in her work, but this of course is not the same thing as trying to remove that claim from that work. So we have yet to be given a reason to think there is an interesting asymmetry between the attitudes of artists and philosophers with respect to the revision of their respective works, and this is what is needed to motivate the claim that the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works is relatively unimportant.

What grounds the degree to which artworks satisfy certain norms is an important topic, but one that we aren’t interested in here. We can say this much, however: it would seem that normally an artist acquires a completion disposition with respect to her work when she judges that the work corresponds sufficiently to the relevant norm.
Why think, however, that the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works is indeed philosophically significant? You might claim that the importance of the distinction primarily lies with the fact that, if a philosophical work is incomplete, then either it has no determinate content or it’s difficult to determine the work’s content. While there are certainly cases of incomplete philosophical works that lack accessible determinate contents, surely this claim is too strong. Consider, for example, a draft of a journal article that is almost complete, save for an introduction that describes each step of the paper and a substantive footnote pursuing some issue further. Assuming that the article is written clearly and competently, it has an accessible determinate content.

You might claim instead that the importance of the distinction primarily lies with the fact that whether a philosophical work is complete makes a difference to its epistemic value. For notice that our judgments about the epistemic value of incomplete philosophical works tend to be measured or qualified, while our judgments concerning complete works aren’t measured or qualified in the same way. We suspect, however, that as a general rule this difference is a function of a prevailing arrangement in academia that only indirectly concerns epistemic value. The social arrangement or pragmatic maxim is roughly this: don’t publically evaluate works in progress relative to the same critical standards that we publically evaluate complete works, for, were we to do so, it may be that no one would ever complete anything.

We propose that the importance of the complete/incomplete distinction with respect to philosophical works primarily lies with the fact that whether a philosophical work is complete makes a difference with respect to our ability to correctly identify the author’s philosophical views. When you are presented with an incomplete philosophical work with an accessible determinate content, it nonetheless can be difficult to identify what the author really thinks. For what the philosopher actually thinks may be different from what the philosophical work actually says. Hence, when your only access to a philosopher’s views is an incomplete work, it can be hard to identify her project and results. And if we can’t identify her project and results, evaluating their epistemic merit is off the table.

The editorial history of Kant’s monumental Critique of Pure Reason illustrates our simple point. As is well known, the first edition was published in 1781, and Kant substantially revised the text in preparation for the second edition of 1787. Generations of editors and readers have pondered the question of the relationship between these ‘A’ and ‘B’ editions. Three salient views on the matter are as follows. First, there is exactly one work. This ‘single work view’ comes in three rival versions: (i) the work was incomplete in 1781 (so the A edition is a presentation of the work before it was done, and the B edition is a presentation of the complete work); (ii) the Critique wasn’t finished until the publication of what Raymund Schmidt (1956, viii) lists as the “fifth original edition” of 1799, which was the last edition personally authorized by Kant, and (iii) Kant never finished his Critique, so it is best classified as an incomplete work. Second, there are exactly two works: one work was completed in 1781 (the A edition), another derivative work was completed in 1787 (the B edition), and these two works happen to have the same title. Third, there are exactly
three works: there is the work that was completed in 1781 (the A edition), the work that was completed in 1787 (the B edition), and another work that was completed in 1787, a “composite work,” with the first two works as parts (cf. Norman Kemp Smith 1929, vi).

Two key questions about this case are whether Kant acquired a completion disposition in 1781 and whether he acquired a completion disposition in 1787. We think the evidence regarding Kant’s ongoing revisions supports negative responses to both questions. Just before the first edition was about to appear at the Easter book fair of 1781, Kant wrote Herz saying, “little additions and clarifications would be desirable” (cited by Guyer and Wood 1998, 66). So the door to revision was already ajar in his mind. It was subsequently kicked open by his reading of Garve and Feder’s critical review in which Kant was accused of Berkeleyan idealism, a charge that inspired the writing of a new “Refutation of Idealism” and a complete rewriting of the text of the “Transcendental Deduction” of the categories. As Paul Guyer and Allan Wood report, the revisions made in the preparation of the second edition were only the beginning of a much longer process: “a dozen or more further versions [of the refutation of idealism] from the period 1788-90 survive to show that Kant continued to work on this argument even after the second edition of the first Critique had already appeared” (1998, 72).

The lesson to be drawn here is not that the completion of a tidy philosophical work ought to have been Kant’s primary concern. It is rational for a philosopher to revise her views with an eye to getting things right. But in the absence of a definite, unrevised statement, the content of the philosopher’s views can be elusive and so all the more difficult to assess. Since Kant kept revising his first Critique (a dozen or more versions of the refutation of idealism!), the best scholarly editions present us with the untidy and at times uncomfortable conjunction of versions, revisions, and corrections, including those that Kant wrote in the margins of his copy of the first edition. If a similar copy of the second edition could be found, its annotations should be included in the mix.

17 In spite of his revisions, in the preface to the second edition Kant contended that it was mainly the ‘presentation’ [Darstellung] of his system that had needed a few changes, and he brazenly asserted that he had “found nothing to alter either in the propositions themselves or in their grounds of proof, or in the form and completeness of the book’s plan” (Kant 1998/1787, 120). It may be worth recalling that Kant was here referring to texts that many other philosophers have interpreted as expressing substantively different views. Schopenhauer, for example, called the second edition a Verschlimmbesserung (roughly, a ‘disimprovement’) in his 1837 letter to Rosenkranz (Schemann 1893, 197), whereas others proclaimed the superiority of the B edition as the best expression of Kant’s thought.

18 It’s worth observing here that many similar editorial nightmares – cases of protracted revision coupled with partial publication or exhibition – can be found in the arts. Think of such large and fascinating fragments as Proust’s Recherche and Robert Musil’s Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, parts of which were completed and published. Knowing they are incomplete matters is important, but this is not the most important thing to ponder with regard to these fascinating texts. Just as readers can find artistic value in these incomplete literary works, so can philosophical readers continue to take interest in the various claims set forth in the texts of Kant’s incomplete Critique.
References


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