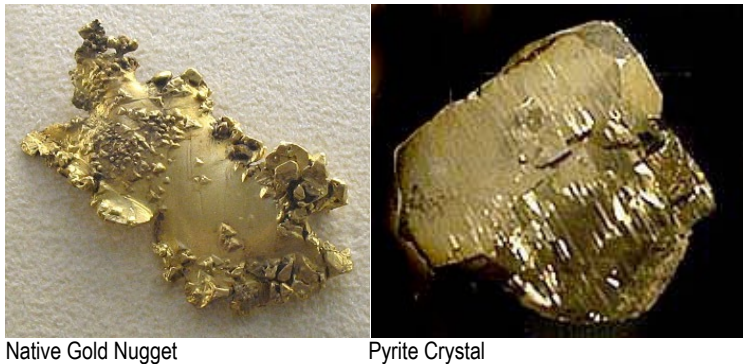


Art and Philosophy: Some Essential Distinctions

Philosophy begins in wonder. But it very quickly leads to complications and questions. To set the stage for our introduction to Plato's philosophy of art, let's think for just a minute **not** about the practice of art or works of art, but about something else considered highly valuable. Gold. This shift of emphasis at the very outset may strike you as odd. But, perhaps, the exercise will be instructive.

Our philosophical examination begins with two apparently similar, but very different questions: "What is gold?" and "What is the meaning of 'gold'?" There seems to be nothing extraordinary in asking these straightforward questions. But in philosophy, as in everyday life, things are not always as straightforward as they seem.¹



Native Gold Nugget

Pyrite Crystal

The first question, "What is gold?", asks about the **nature of the thing** — what makes it gold as opposed to silver, or iron pyrite (the technical name for "fool's gold")? This sort of question is often referred to by philosophers as a question about the "**real essence**" of a thing. In this case, "What is gold?" is a question about the real essence of a **kind** of thing that we find in **nature** — a **natural kind** of thing.²

Now the second question, "What is the meaning of 'gold'?", looks and sounds similar to the first question, but raises a different concern. "Meaning", in "What is the meaning of 'gold'?", focuses our attention on a **linguistic** term — on ordinary language — in this case the English word "gold". What does this **word** mean? Since the question is a question about language, in particular about a noun and the **name** of a kind of thing, philosophers call this a question about the **nominal essence** of "gold". ("Nominal" comes from the Latin for "belonging to a name".) So, the question "What is the meaning of 'gold'?" is about the essence of a **name** rather than the essence of a **thing**. That's an important difference. We'll come back to it in just a moment.

Now, with regard to the first question, how do we determine the real essence of a **thing**? That's typically the job of science and it often involves identifying some set of micro-structural properties that distinguish gold from other naturally occurring compounds. These micro-properties include the arrangement of atoms, as well as the atomic weight, atomic number, and specific gravity of gold. Its micro-structural composition puts it in relation to other metallic compounds. Scientists, of course, use similar processes in identifying the essential features of other natural kinds — **biological** species are classified according to their **genetic** makeup and **descent from common**

¹ This discussion is derived from Stephen Davies's analysis in *Philosophical Perspectives on Art*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 23-7.

² "Scientific disciplines divide the particulars they study into *kinds* and theorize about those kinds. To say that a kind is *natural* is to say that it corresponds to a grouping or ordering that does not depend on humans." Bird, Alexander and Tobin, Emma, "Natural Kinds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/natural-kinds/>>.

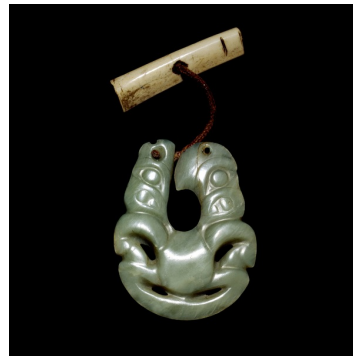
ancestors, for example. So the process of identifying the real essence, if there is one, is similar and falls within the domain of science, **not** philosophy.

The fact that the sciences grew out of philosophy is another and much longer story. But there's an important observation to make. Science has only recently arrived at techniques of analysis that enable scientists to gain information about the hidden, micro-properties of things. But before this scientific knowledge emerged, human beings had already noticed the **apparent** differences between, for example, gold and "fool's gold", as well as zebras and horses, elm trees and beech trees, cherry blossoms and lilacs, etc. And as the differences among these objects was recognized, each was given its own **name**.

But problems arise if these differences among things are **not** so obvious. I've already used gold and "fool's gold" as one example in which the perceptible differences between two metallic compounds is not so obvious. The same is true of "**jade**". You may know that "jade" is a name given to either of two minerals — jadeite or nephrite — both of which look very much alike. They're treated as if they were the same thing — the same **natural kind** of thing. But they're not. So here's a clear case where two things, different by **nature** and with distinct **real essences**, have the same **nominal essence**, that is, the same **name** in the English language. The apparent **macro**-properties of jadeite and nephrite do not indicate the underlying and essential differences between them.



Jadeite Pectoral, Mayan



Nephrite Pendant, Maori

So here's the problem. If, in this case and others, ordinary language does not reflect the real differences among things, to what extent are we misled by language about the real nature of things? In the most extreme cases, we have words for, and beliefs about, things that **don't exist at all**. Unicorns are one example. They don't exist and, as far as we know, they have never existed! Yet we have a name for these non-existent things. And not just in English, but in many different languages.

Now I think you can see that we're moving closer to the realm of philosophical problems.

Science is not the only reference when it comes to the human classification of things and the names used to refer to them. We also arrange the world conceptually according to our needs and interests, based on the things that matter most to us. Often our rough and ready categories — jade, tree, seagull (a loose term for a variety of different species of birds), weed, etc. — are just fine and suit our purposes, regardless of whether they pick out natural kinds or not. So there's yet another basis for the "mismatch" between natural and nominal classifications of things. For some purposes, rough distinctions may be good enough.

When we move **beyond** natural kinds of things to consider **human creations** — hair styles, books, vacations, passports, computer games, etc., etc. — the situation becomes even more complicated. These things, in general, do **not** have underlying (real) essences. They're not natural kinds. They're "non-natural" or, to use a more colloquial term, **artificial**, which derives from the notion of artifice and that which is made not by nature but by human endeavor — by

“art”. (We’ll see that for the ancient Greeks, all things made by human beings were classified as art and shared important traits.)

Take the example of a cellphone, which serves the function of, among other things, interpersonal communication. A cellphone is not a natural kind. You wouldn’t expect to see one washed up on the beach like a seashell or a clam. If you did, you would never mistake it for a natural object. You would see it as something designed and made to serve a purpose, even if you came from a society in which there were no cellphones and you couldn’t be sure what purpose or purposes it was designed to serve.

The cellphone has purposes that serve our needs and interests. It has a **nominal**, but not a real, essence. And we should note, as well, that our **concept** of a cellphone is also a human invention. The purpose of the concept is not to pick out a natural kind of thing, but to refer to the artificial items, intentions, and human practices related to these handy communication devices. Of course, we can still run into complications and confusions with regard to our purposes and the things we make, both physical and conceptual. So, for example, humans are great inventors of **games**, but we may not fully understand what makes something a game and what is picked out by the word “game”. We may not even be clear on its **nominal** essence, that is, how to define “game”.

At this point, you can probably see how all this talk about real and nominal essences applies to art. The basic questions are the same.

1. Is art a natural kind?
2. Does it have a real essence?
3. Is it a natural, biological characteristic of human beings?
4. Is an artwork more like a nugget of gold or a cellphone?

On the one hand, since human beings make art, you might want to defend the view that art is not



Tutankhamun Funerary Mask,
Egyptian, 18th Dynasty

a natural kind and has no real essence, important though it may be. But on the other hand, art (dance, music, poetry, sculpture, painting, drawing) seems to exist in every society, historically and geographically. So, in that sense, it may indicate a **natural** tendency in the human species related to evolutionary, selective value. Or you might conclude that art is something in between, as it were — a **human** construction, but one that depends on **natural** features of human experience.

What do you think? What reasons do you have that lead you to such a conclusion?

Timothy Quigley, revised 1 Aug 16