

# Originality and Value

(Abstract)

What does it mean to describe a work of art as being ‘original’? Frank Sibley believed that works of art are not valued for their originality independently of their aesthetic value. He argued that a work may be described as being ‘original’ if it is innovative and also exhibits some further aesthetic value. In this essay, I argue against this conjunctive account of originality as some kind of innovation-plus-value. I claim that a work may be valued for and described as being ‘original’ if the work serves as the origin of some wider movement within the art world.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic value, originality, Frank Sibley

We often praise works of art for their originality, but exactly what we are celebrating seems unclear. A claim that has received wide acceptance is that originality cannot be valued for itself as this would seemingly require us to praise works that might be otherwise deplorable, what Kant described as ‘original nonsense’<sup>1</sup>. What does seem clear is that we often ascribe originality to works, and that we often seem to value works for their originality—we do not easily lose interest in the genuinely original work. In this paper, I begin by examining an essay by Frank Sibley that I think captures the two problems of originality—its use as an evaluative term and its nature. I will then offer some criticism of his account. Finally, I will attempt an alternative definition of originality that I believe comes closer to capturing both the value and nature of originality.

## I. Originality as an Evaluative Term

Sibley’s objective in his essay ‘Originality and Value’<sup>2</sup>, in summary, is to offer a

clarification of the varying uses ascribed to the term ‘originality’, while setting limits for its use as an evaluative term. Sibley identifies four usages of originality, differing mostly in degree, each of which can meaningfully be understood as having both evaluative and non-evaluative usages. This distinction between the evaluative and non-evaluative usage, given Sibley’s concern, is quite right (and which I will say more on shortly), but I think it also becomes the source of much trouble for Sibley. In its evaluative sense, originality, Sibley claims, must be understood as the product of a conjunction often meaning ‘new, different, uncopied, one’s own work, etc. *and* of some value’<sup>3</sup>. Works that are ‘new, different, uncopied’, represent a significant change in the production of artworks. These works, it might be said, are significantly different from their predecessors, offering a new way of conceiving of some old task, breaking away with hackneyed or exhausted old traditions. But, Sibley is quick to point out, simply being ‘new, different, uncopied’ is not enough to make a work *original*. Original works are not the only things that break

---

<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987) §46.

<sup>2</sup> *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1985; 25: 169-184. Reprinted in *Approach to Aesthetics* (Oxford:

---

Clarendon Press, 2001) pp. 119-134. All page references are to the 2001 reprint.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

from tradition, and breaking from tradition is not always a good thing. Very often such works, though new and different, can be quite shallow as well. These, Sibley claims, are the class of mere novelties. In the remainder of this section I will give a closer examination of these claims and offer some objections.

What is required of a work for it to be original in Sibley's usage is, first, its being new and, second, its being 'of some value'. It appears by his use of the conjunction that originality for its own sake cannot be a meritorious attribute, but only becomes a merit to the work once newness is married to some other aesthetic virtue. This rightly allows Sibley to account for the possibility of an innovative work that is otherwise aesthetically worthless. For instance, the first sonnets, though original in form, may have been embarrassingly simple, or just uninspiring beyond their formal innovation. Innovation, taken in this sense, is not itself an evaluative term as it offers 'no reason so far to suppose that extremely innovative works that have aesthetic merit must have great rather than slight merit, or that greater originality in this sense implies greater merit'<sup>4</sup>. For Sibley, flawed works may be innovative, but the interest found in these works is merely the excitement of novelty; and a novel work, regardless of its inventiveness, is undeserving of praise. Innovation in itself does not make any addition to the value of a work, for an innovative work 'does not suddenly become moving, powerful, profound, by being proved significantly different from its predecessors'<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 134. Sticking to the innovation/originality distinction, it should be noted that in the text, this quote is directed towards originality, but I have changed it to innovation for clarity.

The newness of innovation does not necessarily improve the aesthetic quality of a work according to Sibley, however the lack of innovation can negatively impact the aesthetic value of a work. Some aesthetic merits, like profundity, might be diminished if the work is shown to be derivative from some previous work, and this, Sibley claims, shows innovation to be worthwhile only insofar as it stands to uphold some other aesthetic merit. The bond that innovation must form with some other aesthetic merit seems to be quite strong, though it is only a one-way relation carrying only negative consequences. Innovation does not make a work profound; and profundity does not make a work innovative; but if it could be shown that a work that once was believed to be innovative, in fact proved not to be so, then this could reasonably lessen our judgment of the work's profundity. Sibley seems to be saying two things here: first, the claim seems to be that, as profundity can be diminished through the discovery of a work's lacking innovation, then the lack of innovation seems to be capable of producing a negative effect. Taken as a negative claim, this seems to be correct, however it is not clear whether this ties originality up with, in this case, profundity as strongly as Sibley would like. More on this will come later in this paper. Second, the claim, straightforwardly, appears to be that innovation alone adds no aesthetic value to a work, but only confirms some previously given value. In Sibley's account, originality is derived from innovation-plus-some-other-aesthetic-value; so if we are told that a work is original, we may infer that the work is both innovative and it possesses some other aesthetic merit. Sibley is right in saying that originality does not suddenly make a work

profound (or elegant, or insightful, or whatever), but we are left wondering why innovation alone is not an aesthetic merit of the work.

One way to understand why Sibley separates value from originality lies in his sense of the ‘intrinsic specific value’ of an object. Each work of art, he claims, has an intrinsic value, which is ‘its own aesthetic merit detached from whatever value it has as influence on later artists or trends .... It seems difficult to operate without allowing that any poem, say, has certain merits, is aesthetically fine, poor, or indifferent ... for it is its merit that a careful reader attempts to recognise and assess’<sup>6</sup>. This intrinsic value is specific, which I take Sibley to mean that a work’s specific value is fine-grained—it is a complete description of the work’s aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, I take the idea of ‘intrinsic specific value’ to be committed to the aesthetic uniqueness of works of art, meaning that any two works whose intrinsic specific values are identical would be interchangeable from the point of view of the aesthetic enjoyment of those works<sup>7</sup>. Sibley talks briefly about the possibility that works with closely similar specific values (let’s call this value *A*) might be interchangeable as such, if one wanted to have an experience of the type *A*, and two works, *w* and *x*, both shared *A* as their specific value, then, if having the experience of type *A* is all that we are after, it seems that Sibley is suggesting one could somehow arbitrarily choose one work or the other—either work would do<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-9.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the idea of ‘aesthetic uniqueness’, see Jerrold Levinson, ‘Aesthetic Uniqueness’, in his *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 107-133.

<sup>8</sup> Sibley does not make this argument explicitly, though it can be easily constructed given the claims he makes about comparing the aesthetic

value between works of art on pp. 122-3 and again on pp. 128-131.

Given this view of intrinsic specific value, an original work for Sibley is any work that offers a ‘new, different, specific value’.

What Sibley’s handling of the subject lacks is a more positive account, offering an explanation of situations where the term ‘originality’ is correctly applied evaluatively. We are told quite a bit about cases when originality does not apply—as in the case of aesthetically-worthless-though-innovative works—but we are given only some slight suggestions on the correct applications of the term. Specifically, we are not told what sort of value a work must have in addition to innovation for it to count as an original work. Some clues indicate that the sort of values Sibley might have had in mind could be those such as being *moving*, *powerful* or *profound*, but this is inexhaustive. Are there any other constraints we should consider on which a work’s aesthetic value in conjunction with innovation would count? Specifically, would negative aesthetic values in conjunction with innovation count towards a work’s originality? An example of a negative value would be the monotony of the conceptual artist On Kawara’s performance piece named *Reading One Million Years*, where a man and a woman sit inside a glass box reading from a list of one million dates. When performed without stopping, the work takes four days to complete. Recently performed in London’s Trafalgar Square, On Kawara’s work is meant to highlight monotony and our obsession with the passing of time. (Luckily, anyone who missed this performance of *Reading One Million Years* can now buy it on a CD—it comes in a four-disc set!) Could an innovative and monotonous work count as original?

Must innovation be combined only with aesthetic attributes? Or might some other artistic attribute do? And, of course, to what degree should this attributing be held? Would a highly innovative, but only mildly moving work be considered only mildly original, and highly original? Or would it be somewhere in between? I imagine that a theorist set on defending Sibley's conjunction would be hard pressed to offer a satisfying answer, and unless it could be shown that my question is misguided, I would hold that this is an unintuitive and unconvincing view of originality, finding it more plausible that innovation is something we often do value on its own, though artistically, not aesthetically.

Though I sympathise with Sibley's scepticism about what he calls the 'cult of originality,' I question whether this non-evaluative, conjunctive account of *original* accurately portrays how we value such works of art. What I find right about his account, which must be kept, is the need to distinguish originality from novelty. Through denying that originality can be valued in itself, Sibley has the possibility to differentiate between truly original and valued works of art and mere novelties, which may appear at first to involve some innovation, but on a closer inspection are found to be rather shallow. Sibley is of course right to deplore novelty as such, however I feel that his view would dismiss works of lesser quality as novelties too quickly. Additionally, Sibley's characterisation of novelty as simply innovation-with-no-other-value seems equally unintuitive: are all novelties shallow? Novelties, in the kitschy sense that Sibley is concerned with, intuitively seem to be more than just new-but-unfortunately-bad works—they are an eyesore, an embarrassment, a bad joke. Novelty and originality clearly do

share something in their uniqueness or newness, but they must also differ in more than the latter's being otherwise valued and the former's not. A requirement that any account of originality needs to make clear is what, on the part of innovation, makes one work original and another deplorable.

We must first acknowledge that originality, as Sibley (and others<sup>9</sup>) have suggested, has both evaluative and non-evaluative uses, and it would be helpful to distinguish between the two. To this end, I offer that, when taken evaluatively, 'originality' is usually concerned with the description of some act of creativity; and when taken non-evaluatively, 'originality' is usually taken to be an issue of authenticity<sup>10</sup>. The question of a work's authenticity is a question of that object's history, which is in itself a non-evaluative question, though issues concerning the object's history may have consequences for its evaluation<sup>11</sup>. Having said this, one difference between the authenticity-sense of 'original' and the

<sup>9</sup> Among those Sibley cites as holding a similar view over the conjunction of originality and value are Beardsley, Osborne, Collingwood and Kant, and it is questionable whether Sibley also places Meager and Lessing on his side. Also see A. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995) 153.

<sup>10</sup> In this I am following Hoaglund ('Originality and Aesthetic Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1976; 16: 46-55) who divides originality into three: authenticity, (formal) uniqueness, and (artistic) creativity. I differ from Hoaglund in that I stress the non-evaluative aspect of authenticity, and I reject uniqueness for being too weak, dividing originality into only two. Also, creativity, which is the evaluative half of originality, needs more spelling out than he offers.

<sup>11</sup> As authenticity seeks to establish the history of an object, and our evaluation of a work may depend strongly on this history, authenticity may have some effect on our appreciation of a work. Though I take it as obvious that the statements 'x is a Picasso' and 'x is beautiful' are cognitively different types of statements, and they are so partly because the first is non-evaluative.

creativity-sense can be found in our common use of language: it is the difference between a work's being *an* original and a work's being *original*—a work 'is original' in the evaluative sense when we mean to praise an artist's creative activity, whereas an object 'is an original' in the authenticity-sense when the object has been established to be the product of some artist's own hand. Further I should add that the evaluative use of 'original' only makes sense if we take it to be making a strong claim about the work: all works of art are the result of some creative activity, in a weak sense, but this obviously cannot be what is meant when 'original' is being used as a term of praise.

One last point: some have claimed in a sense stronger than Sibley's conjunction that all good works of art must be original, or all original works of art must be good. Rather than clarify the issue, this sort of claim merely conflates 'good works' with 'original works', leaving us with even more questions<sup>12</sup>. This conflation ignores the fact that these two can be, and often are, treated individually—there is no short supply of good works of art that are yet unoriginal, uninspired or unimaginative, just as there are many original and creative works that might be otherwise deplorable. There are many reasons, both aesthetical and artistical, for which one can value a work of art, any of which either singly or in combi-

nation with others could perhaps be sufficient for the work to be considered 'good', and originality is only one of these. For example, a work may be original without being an exemplar of its kind—we can then praise and value a work for its originality while still remaining critical of its overall worth. Many of Charles Mingus' compositions were very original, and also very good; though they are hardly exemplars of post-bebop jazz. Conversely, Benny Goodman's compositions were exemplars of swing, and also very good; but they are not generally recognized for their originality. My intuition is that what makes a work 'good' is far more elusive than what makes a work original, but also that 'original' is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for 'good'. I should however point out, with Kant in mind, that nothing I have said should prevent one from arguing that originality is a necessary condition for greatness or genius. I see no immediate problem in making this claim, if one wanted to define genius so, though in the end there might be some other reason for denying it (as genius might, like art, be the sort of thing that has no necessary or sufficient conditions that could be given).

That works of art can be valued for their originality seems intuitively right, as does the claim that this value, whatever it is, is more than the product of a conjunction of innovation-plus-aesthetic-value. In what remains of my essay, I will attempt to offer an account of what this value would be while maintaining the distinction between originality and mere novelty. The first step towards this account has been to distinguish between the use of originality-as-authenticity and originality-as-creativity, where identifying the original manuscript of Joyce's novel *Ulysses* as an issue of authenticity, whereas the originality of Joyce's work is a testi-

<sup>12</sup> This conflation does not answer what makes a work original, or why originality is valued. In addition we also have the problem of explaining why original works cannot be bad, or why good works must be original. I think intuitively this conflation is based on the simple assumption that originality is a privileged evaluative term, thus to say something is original is to say that it must be good/valued. My claim is that treating originality as an aesthetic value is fine so long as we admit that it is one value among many, and that originality does not atone for any of the work's potential faults.

mony to his creativity<sup>13</sup>. In taking up an account of this evaluative sense we should consider exactly what is being attributed to works when they are described as original. We should then turn to the more difficult question: “What makes a work of art original?”

## II. Significant Difference

Unfortunately, quite a bit of imagination will be required to understand what is meant by ‘significant difference’. Though it is a common claim among theories of originality—that an original work is one that is significantly different from works that precede it—few offer an explicit definition of what this might be. There seem to be three thoughts that surface requiring immediate attention: first, when is it correct in a non-trivial sense to describe an object as ‘different’? Clearly, there can be significant differences that are only trivially so—a painting and a sculpture are significantly different kinds of objects, but this is obviously not the sense of *difference* we are after. In order to say something relevant or of interest about the differences between two works, we should restrict ‘difference’ to works of the same kind, type, style or genre. Second, when might these differences be *significant*? We could imagine some cases where differences in, say, colour may not matter at all (in dressmaking), but in other cases it may (in iconographic painting). Last, would this complex notion of significant difference square with the intuitions about originality identified in the previous section? I will look at a few suggestions found in literature and, rather than an attempt for a detailed reconstruction of each theorist’s thought, I will present

what is common to each, only stopping to examine some details closely when these might prove helpful.

Beginning again with Sibley, I observe he describes ‘significant’ or ‘relevant difference’ in reference to his notion of intrinsic specific value, when he says, “[relevant differences] with artworks are whatever gives a work a different aesthetic *character*. . . . Two Titian portraits of the same period, both fine works, similar in style and approach, are yet different; each has aesthetic value, but neither is a substitute for the other since each has a different aesthetic character, offers a different aesthetic experience, and therefore has a different *specific* value”<sup>14</sup>. Remembering the argument offered above, for Sibley an original work is one that offers a new specific value. As Sibley’s relevant difference takes mainly aesthetic differences into consideration, it seems he can simply avoid differences in artistic value. The worry I have about his notion of a relevant difference is that, as it falls entirely on the formal aesthetic character of a work, it fails to take into account the means of production or the creative process associated with an original work. Suppose that we have two works with identical aesthetic character but that differ in their means of production, one having been achieved through some traditional means and the other through a revolutionary and highly-skilful technique. In Sibley’s account, avoiding differences in artistic value and therefore avoiding differences in the means of production, the later work, though having been achieved quite differently, would still be unoriginal. This seems highly unintuitive as, if we want anything out of an account of originality, we should want to describe how we value great creative achievements, and surely

<sup>13</sup> Of course I am describing the *aesthetic* use of original. The original manuscript for *Ulysses* could also be valued, though the reasons for this would not be aesthetic. For more on this see Goodman.

<sup>14</sup> Sibley, 122. The italics are his.

the means of production must have something to say in that account. If significant difference does not refer to differences among works of art from the point of view of their aesthetic character, being instead an artistic value, then perhaps we should take it as a comparison of differences in means of production. For this we could examine Paul Guyer or Paul Crowther<sup>15</sup> who both identify originality with some innovative technique ‘breaking with existing rules of production...in a way that makes new sets of rules possible’<sup>16</sup>. Innovation as the institution of new sets of rules seems promising; however this does not guard us against mere novelty. Novel works can also be innovative in this way. Though the main thrust of Guyer’s essay is to link originality to genius, he argues in a way similar to Sibley’s, that, in order to avoid the ‘original nonsense’ of novelty that Kant warned us of, originality by itself is worthless without some further value. In one passage, Guyer clearly endorses a conjunctive view:

This analysis of artistic beauty entails that truly successful art must always possess what Kant calls ‘exemplary originality’; originality, because the successful work of art can *never appear to have been produced in accordance with a rule* but must always strike us with an element of contingency or novelty; yet exemplary, because it *must at the same time strike us as pleasing* in a way that should be valid for all.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, when correctly applied in its conjunctive sense, Guyer, following Mill,

---

<sup>15</sup> Guyer, ‘Exemplary Originality: Genius, Universality and Individuality’ in *Creation of Art*, eds. Gaut and Livingston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Crowther, ‘Creativity and Originality in Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1991; 31: 301-309. My copy of Guyer’s essay is taken from a draft copy of the book; the page references may have changed since my reading of it.

<sup>16</sup> Crowther, 303.

<sup>17</sup> Guyer, 128, my italics.

finds originality to have a value that serves as ‘the only source for new truths and practices, of which mankind is always in need’<sup>18</sup>. For Crowther, on the other hand, the correct application of originality can be valued as it ‘engages and adds to our global sense of life’<sup>19</sup>, by which he understands our ‘global sense of life’ as the complete engagement between a subject and his or her surroundings that will include the sensuous as well as the intellectual engagement. This engagement is supposed to arise from some empathic understanding of original artworks, though why it is that only original artworks are supposed to engage empathically, how this happens, and what exactly it is Crowther does not say. I take it that it is an empathy that arises between a subject and the creator of a work as Crowther offers this argument while justifying his claim that original works of art logically entail a belief on the part of the subject not just in some creator of the work, but in the belief that only that very person could have created himself or herself such a work<sup>20</sup>.

For both Guyer and Crowther the value of originality is instrumental in that it serves, respectively, to supply us with new ideas or to engage a subject with his or her environment (though Guyer also gives genius, as tied up with originality, an intrinsic value as a ‘source of diversity rather than uniformity in human experience’<sup>21</sup>). Of course, we only arrive at this value when originality is understood as a conjunction of newness-plus-aesthetic-worth; that being the case, neither Guyer nor Crowther, both following Kant, could find value in ‘original nonsense’, which is not something I intend to do either; rather I am interested in finding

---

<sup>18</sup> Guyer, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Crowther, 306.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-6.

<sup>21</sup> Guyer, 135.

an evaluative sense of originality that is not contingent on aesthetic worth but is worthwhile in its own respect, while still avoiding the ‘original nonsense’ of novelties. And if the above argument against the conjunctive sense of originality is right, then the value of Guyer’s and Crowther’s originality—again, the creation of new ideas or the engagement with just that very creator’s thought—is still not enough to guard us against novelty.

### III. Originality as an origin

If significant difference fails to take into account the means of production of original works, and those theories of originality motivated by ‘innovative means of production’ ultimately return us to the problem of a conjunctive sense of value, then another approach must be pursued. But before considering this, I should like to clarify some terms. It often seems that, in discussions on originality, this term has many confusing uses, sometimes being treated as a synonym for either ‘unique’, or simply, ‘different’. It would do well for us then to separate these three and draw distinct boundaries between the terms ‘original’, ‘different’, and ‘unique’. By saying that a work is *unique* I take it to mean that a work (or a set of works) *can be picked out individually by some certain feature (or features) that it shares with no other work*. A unique work can be individuated from other works by its being the sole possessor of some particular attribute (or attributes). Works can be unique in many ways: they can be the unique possessors of physical qualities (as in a painting’s being the unique possessor of just that very combination of shapes and colours); the unique possessors of historical relations (as in a musical work’s being the unique possessor of having been composed by that composer at that time and place); or the unique possessors of some aesthetic

character (where just that work is the unique possessor of just that complex aesthetic quality). We can talk about a work’s uniqueness in these ways, but we can also more generally distinguish the uniqueness of a style, or of a genre, or of an artist’s *oeuvre*. Important to us is the thought that works can be unique in ways that do not entail their also being original; they can be unique in ways that are trivial, or make them undeserving of specific praise.

We may also describe a work as being *different*, meaning that the work *has some feature which is unusual for its kind*. In other words, the work is identified as being a member of some genre, style, *oeuvre*, etc., and yet it differs in respect to some feature that might not normatively be found in a work of that kind. A jazz tune that dispenses with the traditional swing rhythm, using instead straight eighth-notes, would be different for its kind, but without necessarily being original. It is this sense of ‘different’ that allows us to see what ‘significant difference’ might be, while also making it clear why significant difference fails to meet our requirements. A work could be significantly different when it is identified as being a member of some kind that also differs strongly from the norms of that kind making the work stand out from its category. Yet while a work might be significantly (or uniquely) different in this way, it may still be undeserving of the particular praise associated with originality as differences of this sort do not necessarily make something worthwhile—this does not yet distinguish ‘uniquely different’ from mere novelty.

The problem with novelty seems to be that novel works appear very similar to original works in their characteristic newness, though originality implies value and novelty need not. Both can be new, significantly different, or the product of an artist’s breaking with the traditional



rules of production. Novelty is clearly the cousin of originality in that it does share the freshness of seeming innovative, but only for a time. Mere novelty, seen in this way, is a paler sort of originality—although it may be pleasing for awhile, it simply is not worth repeating. Though the novel work might share some of the uniqueness or significant difference that original works possess, novelties seem to exhaust all possibility for development from their beginning. Something that is original is often described as remaining fresh, or able to survive the test of time<sup>22</sup>. A mere novelty, on the other hand, quickly appears old-hat and dated. Through repetition, we recognize, as Sibley warned us, that whatever innovation the novel work possessed was limited in possibility or scope, due perhaps to its shallow nature. The explanation of originality I prefer begins with Sibley's observation on repetition: there must be something about the repetition of original works that is worthwhile, and the desirability for repetition is not something shared with novelty. When we say that something is original, then, we want to say that it is more than merely unique, different or new. Works of originality hold a place of prominence in the art world, which, I would argue, is attributable to their being a sort of 'origin', in the sense that these works ought to inspire future artists to adopt the same creative idea. It is in this that I agree with John Hoaglund who describes the value of originality as 'an event of importance in the dynamic development of a style'<sup>23</sup>. This is not to say that the work *will* be the inspiration of future works, but only that we hold this work in such high regard that it *may be*, or perhaps *ought* to be.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Savile's *The Test of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) would be highly instructive here.

<sup>23</sup> Hoaglund, 52.

An original work is one that is the first clear exhibition of some idea, the repetition of which does not quickly exhaust its utility, but rather provides a new direction for future works. The repetition of this idea does not threaten to exhaust the *functional scope* of the idea, where, by 'functional scope', I mean that role that an idea plays in the achievement of some artistic end. John Coltrane's improvisational style on saxophone was original for his use of modal harmonic phrasing. The end Coltrane was trying to achieve was the development of a style of improvisation that allows a performer the freedom to imply greater harmonic variety than might be available in a tune's harmonic structure. His idea provided the functional scope of lifting the strict confines of key-oriented improvisation, thus enabling a more 'free' approach to the development of an improviser's melodic ideas and harmonic depth. Coltrane's style was more than a mere novelty, more than simply different, unique or new: it was a contribution to jazz improvisation rich enough to inspire other performers to take up his technique and use it with further great effect. Originality exhibits a relative inexhaustibility of functional scope. Novelties, on the other hand, are limited almost from their inception. The end of most novelties is usually very specific, an end that could only be realised in just that very work. Consider a work like Damien Hurst's poor sheep in formaldehyde, *Away from the Flock*. The idea of exhibiting dead animals in formaldehyde is one that probably won't get much mileage. That is not to say that it cannot be an interesting idea, but it is to say that whatever value this work has as an innovation, it is the passing value of an idea whose realizability is quickly exhausted, whose functional scope is limited to just that very work (or, Hirst's case, a set of works

toward that end)<sup>24</sup>. Originality is not so confined, the functional scope being open enough both to realising the intended end in a greater number of ways, and, on the other hand, to facilitating the realisation of some other end through the same technique.

The definition I then offer for originality is:

‘A work is original if it and it alone can be shown to be the source of some idea whose functional scope makes for worthwhile repetition through effective implementation of the idea in some multiple and/or diverse settings’.

The phrase ‘can be shown’ is intended to allow for mistakes in the ascription of originality, as when the discovery of an earlier work proves that what we once thought to be an original work proved not to be so. By ‘worthwhile repetition through effective implementation’ I mean to distinguish a work that successfully incorporates some previously stated idea into another setting from works that are merely imitative. For this I shall have to rely on the commonsense understanding of this distinction: non-imitative works incorporate ideas for the creation of something new, rather than the re-tracing of some already established ground. Lastly, by ‘multiple and/or diverse settings’ I mean that an idea can be traced through works either of the same style, type or kind, or works of very different styles, genres or even traditions. Ideas about, e.g., Cubism were successfully incorporated in other works of the same type by the same artist, as well as having been incorporated with arguable

success, though in quite different forms, in sculpture, music and literature.

The things I find right with this definition are, first, it clearly shows why it is that we might value an original work. These works are valued for their contribution to the development of a new style, technique or idea; they are the first clear examples of such an innovation; they *are* the origin, the sort of works that ought to be repeated. Second, by emphasizing the desire for repetition, this definition offers us a clear criterion by which we might differentiate ‘original’ from both ‘unique’ and ‘different’. Unique or different works may not be successfully repeatable, but they may be, instead, interesting novelties. This definition, however, does leave us somewhere out on a limb when it comes to contemporary works. When making the claim that ‘x is original’ about a contemporary work, the speaker is apparently offering his judgment that ‘x is the sort of work that, through repetition of its technique, would be expected to produce similarly valued works’, which is quite a strong claim to make. Given this definition, we might be a bit hesitant when attributing originality to works that aren’t clearly original to us. But I maintain that this definition reflects a more accurate use of the term “original”, and as such I am willing to accept the restriction of the ascription of originality to contemporary works. To conclude, I will consider two objections, and offer two (unrelated) apologies.

First, is this account really any different from Sibley’s? My intention was to show that originality is valued for itself in a non-conjunctive way. However, to return to an example given above, can’t the originality of Coltrane’s playing be explained simply as the conjunction of new-and-worthwhile? An idea that is worth repeating will always be a good idea, but this ‘goodness’ is not attribut-

<sup>24</sup> It is no objection to point out that Damien Hurst actually has repeated his ‘animals in formaldehyde’ idea, as its repetition goes to prove my point. There are three of such works that I am aware of and, having seen them, I get that old feeling of ‘if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all’: the first one I saw was very striking, but his other works left me quite unimpressed.

able to its innovativeness. Just the very admission that an idea must be repeatable seems to imply that the value of originality lies in some sort of conjunction, this time with 'repeatable' as one of the necessary parts—perhaps new-and-repeatable—which doesn't seem to bring us any further than Sibley already has. To establish the value of originality as more than a conjunction, I have had to distinguish it from novelty by claiming that originality is more than innovation-for-innovation's-sake, but in order to do so I have had to argue that this value lies in an innovative idea that is fecund in its application. This, I maintain, differs from Sibley's account in that, it should be remembered, his conjunctive account found no value in such innovative ideas—whatever value a work might have it must be tied to some other *aesthetic* feature of the work. A work can be valued, on my account, simply for its exhibiting some innovative idea without also exhibiting, e.g., profundity; the only stipulation being that the innovative idea must be one worth repeating—the idea cannot be a one-off.

Another problem might be that one thing we often like to do in discussing original works, is to compare the degree of originality between two works. Thus, we might argue, for instance, whether the compositions of Duke Ellington are greater in originality than those of Charles Ives. Given my definition of originality, it would seem that such an argument would be settling over whose ideas had a greater functional scope, or even worse, whose ideas went on to influence *more* works in the future. It would be false to argue that one composer was more original than the other by simply appealing to the greater influence that one may have had over the other—there can be many explanations why one artist might be more influential than another, but these may prove little

to nothing about their originality. Suppose we were to seriously consider comparing the compositions of Ellington to those of Ives in an attempt to settle this argument. We might proceed by examining the artistic or personal influences that affected each composer's musical development, thereby attempting to show that one composer had departed more drastically from their surrounding artistic environment than the other. But if this is how we would deem to settle a comparison of originality, then the method seems to collapse into an account of significant difference—and as the model of originality I offered would seem to be more of a hindrance to settling this comparison, then it might be objected that my definition is just misguided—that after all, originality must be cashed out as significant difference in order to explain these comparisons. But this objection only appears more worrying than it actually is.

First, my definition of originality is meant to establish why we value originality, whereas this comparison seems to be more of a question of art history, where the aim would be to describe the development of an artist's technique or style. Such a description of artistic development must take into account changes in style or technique that would in this comparative sense be significantly different, though we must be clear that it is not simply these differences that are valued, rather it is the value of an original idea that forces further development. For this art-historical reason, this sort of comparison *is* more naturally a question of significant difference, where, if we were to spell out the claim that 'x is more original than y', it would come out as, 'x is more significantly different than y', and not 'x is more influential than y'. Lastly, and I think most importantly, we can now see that the problem this objection presents is based on a confusion:

when we seek to compare works or artists for their originality, as in the example above, often what we are after is just such an art-historical account of some moment of innovation in an artist's development, and, again, innovation in this art-historical sense need not imply value. It would not threaten my definition to claim that significant difference in this art-historical sense is a necessary condition for originality, though it is not a sufficient one as, again, significant difference is not enough to ensure value or differentiate originality from novelty. It is only based on a confusion—that we choose to compare original, and therefore valued, works—that leads to this seeming collapse.

A more complete account of this definition would require a further distinction between what would count as the successful repetition of an idea and a simply derivative work. The former would again be of some value whereas the latter would in this value be lacking, though both could count as attempts to incorporate some idea (one successfully and the other not). Lack of space prevents me from going into further detail, however it should be noticed that, even if my definition were found to be untenable, this distinction might be a further requirement for any theory of originality—to declare some work to be unoriginal would imply that it is derivative, or at least, it is not clear to what extent the failure to achieve originality is a fault for

this work, or how damaging a fault it would be. Also, a longer essay may provide a more adequate examination of whether this sense of originality should be understood as an instrumental or intrinsic value. It looks at first glance to be instrumental, as this definition indicates that originality is valued for its repeatability, though a closer look might reveal that this value is rather intrinsic to the work. Some may find the notion of an intrinsic artistic value strange—as artistic value is something we find in comparison between works, or when such artistic relational factors are brought into play, then it might seem odd to describe originality as intrinsic. But this peculiarity might be clarified by arguing that, though originality is a value that only manifests itself in comparison with other works, the original work must intrinsically possess some feature that sets it off from other works such as that an original work is one that can be identified as having just that very feature. As this feature is intrinsic to the work compared to other works, its value might also be an intrinsic, though artistic, value<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the British Society of Aesthetics conference in Oxford, September 2003, where I received much helpful criticism and encouragement. I would also like to thank Jerrold Levinson and Carolyn Wilde for reading and commenting on that earlier paper, and Terry Diffey for his advice on the penultimate draft.

**Christopher BARTEL** completed his PhD at King's College London and is currently an assistant professor of philosophy at Appalachian State University. His research interests include the perception of music, the ontology of musical works and empirical attempts at defining the value of music. E-mail: bartelcj@appstate.edu