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Artwork completion : a response to Gover

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Artwork Completion: A Response to Gover

Let a *revision invitation scenario* be a case in which a particular possibility becomes salient to an artist, namely that she could make significant changes to her work. Let an artist have a *refrainment disposition* with respect to her work just in case the artist is disposed to refrain from making significant changes to her work in revision invitation scenarios. Let a *completion disposition* be a refrainment disposition that is grounded in certain cognitive mechanisms, specifically rational capacities of the artist consisting of various beliefs, desires, and further cognitive dispositions. In “The Complete Work” we set out and defend a view of artwork completion, the *disposition view*: an artwork is complete just in case the artist who created the work has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work. We read Gover as posing six objections to the disposition view. Below we reconstruct the objections and respond to each of them.

Objection 1: the disposition view collapses into the judgment view.

Rationale: while there are different versions of the judgment view of artwork completion, they all agree that an artwork is complete only if the artist who created the work has made a *completion judgment* about her work – she has judged that her work is complete. The disposition view is wrongly presented as an alternative to the judgment view. Completion judgments aren’t supposed to be necessary for artwork completion on the disposition view, yet an artist has a completion disposition with respect to her work only if she has made a completion judgment about her work.

Response: completion judgments aren’t necessary for the acquisition of completion dispositions. Suppose that an artist is sympathetic to art-theoretical skepticism about work completion – when asked about her views on artwork completion in general she says that all artistic activity is “necessarily incomplete” and “always already endless.” Suppose that she nevertheless acquires a completion disposition with respect to one of her artworks. This disposition we will suppose results in part from thoughts about the work’s features (for example, she imaginatively compares the perceived features of the work to possible changes that come to mind, and senses that the piece would be best left alone). The psychological equilibrium she reaches in this case doesn’t involve an occurrent belief to the effect that her work is complete, as she never has occurrent beliefs with this content. Since the artist judges that her work is complete only if she has an occurrent belief to the effect that the work is complete, in this case she doesn’t make a completion judgment with respect to her work. (And, speaking of the occurrent/dispositional distinction with respect to beliefs, it seems that the artist doesn’t have a dispositional belief to the effect that her work is complete either.)

Objection 2: the disposition view is viciously circular.

Rationale: according to the disposition view, an artwork is complete just in case the artist is disposed to treat the work as complete, and for the artist to be disposed to treat the work as complete is just for her to treat the work as being complete.

Response: this isn't an accurate reconstruction of the disposition view. In particular, this gloss of the view doesn't capture the notion of a completion disposition as we present it in the paper. Moreover, it's unclear that this gloss of the view is viciously circular in any case. Let the *simple view* be the following: for an artwork to be complete is for the artist to treat the work as being complete. While we don't endorse the simple view, it isn't to be rejected on the grounds that it's circular provided that the notion of treating a work as being complete is understood independently of the notion of a work being complete.

Objection 3: the disposition view requires that, for any complete work, there is a precise moment at which it goes from being incomplete to being complete, yet it seems that there is no such moment.

Rationale: a consequence of the disposition view is this: in the Géricault case there was a precise moment at which *The Raft* went from being an incomplete work to a complete work – the exact moment Géricault acquired a completion disposition with respect to *The Raft*. It seems, however, that there was no such moment.

Response: many predicates are vague. Plausibly, 'being a complete artwork' is such a predicate. That is to say, it seems that there are borderline cases for this predicate, cases in which it neither applies nor fails to apply. And if 'being a complete artwork' is vague then there is no precise moment at which *The Raft* went from being incomplete to complete. Note, however, that the disposition view is compatible with 'being a complete artwork' being vague, provided that 'acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work' is vague as well. And it's independently plausible to think that the latter predicate is vague, as many (all?) psychological predicates are vague.

Objection 4: the disposition view makes incorrect property attributions.

Rationale: when a work is complete, this is because the artist who created the work has certain features, not because the artwork itself has a particular property, viz. what the disposition view identifies as the property of being complete.

Response: we agree that an artwork is complete only if the artist who created the work has come to have certain features. But we also think that when the artist comes to have the relevant features (when she acquires a completion disposition with respect to her work), the fact that she has these features grounds the fact that the work itself has a certain feature, namely the property of being complete.

Objection 5: the disposition view includes an implicit, second 'no-going-back' condition: if the artist has acquired a completion disposition with regard to a particular work, that work is irrevocably complete, even if the artist subsequently loses the completion disposition with regard to this very work. The disposition view so understood, however, is subject to counterexamples.

Rationale: a completion disposition, like any psychological disposition, can be acquired and then lost. With this in mind, one way of understanding the Géricault case is as follows: (i) Géricault acquired a completion disposition with respect to his work and when he did so his work went from being incomplete to complete, (ii) later he lost this disposition and when he

did so his work went from being complete to incomplete, and (iii) still later he gained a completion disposition with respect to his work and when he did so again his work went from being incomplete to complete. Perhaps this isn't how the Géricault case actually unfolded, but if such a case is possible then the disposition view supplemented with the no-going-back condition is false.

Response: we don't see the no-going-back considerations as amounting to a separate condition. Instead, our discussion of this issue was intended to simply clarify what consequences the disposition view has. The disposition view says that an artwork is complete just in case the artist who created the work has acquired a completion disposition with respect to her work. If the artist loses her completion disposition with respect to her work, it will still be true that she once had a completion disposition with respect to work. Hence, the disposition view is compatible with the idea that an artwork is complete even if the artist currently lacks a completion disposition with respect to her work. So, returning to the potential counterexample described above, the disposition view does indeed have the consequence that *The Raft* couldn't have gone from being complete to being incomplete. But we don't see this as being problematic for the view. There are possible cases in which works go from being incomplete to complete – this claim functions as a datum that any account of artwork completion must accommodate. But the idea that there are possible cases in which works go from being complete to incomplete doesn't have the same status – it's unclear that such cases are possible (unless the work in question is destroyed or seriously damaged), so it's not a desideratum of a theory of artwork completion that it take this possibility into account.

Objection 6: the disposition view has implausible epistemic consequences.

Rationale: whether an artist has a completion disposition can only be inferred from the artist's behavior. Hence, if an artwork is complete in virtue of the fact that the artist who created it has a completion disposition with respect to her work then whether an artwork is complete likewise can only be inferred from the artist's behavior. But we can know that an artwork is complete without making inferences that concern the artist's behavior. To think otherwise would have us knowing less about which artworks are complete than we in fact do.

Response: we deny that you can know that an artwork is complete without making inferences that concern the artist's behavior. Note, however, that this doesn't mean that you know that an artwork is complete only if you've directly observed the artist's relevant behavior. In the case of poetry, for example, we often have ancillary material indicating that the artist did behave in the relevant way. This material includes manuscripts, published texts, and statements by the author or associates of the author from diaries, letters, and interviews. We acknowledge, however, that often we do not know what we would like to know about artists and their works. But it is better to recognize our uncertainty than to indulge in wishful thinking.