Introduction

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Museums have traditionally been understood as places where carefully selected objects are categorized and put on display so that they can be known through observation. So-called 'world-museums', such as the British Museum, were designed to provide the public with access to the wider world through the knowledge they could acquire simply by observing the objects put forward for their inspection. This understanding of what museums do has been increasingly called into question due to changing views of knowledge-acquisition. New understandings of museums are emerging that seek to be responsive to more complex epistemological theories, and philosophers, as evidenced by the essays in this volume, are taking a lively interest in this development. As the essays in this volume further show, specific aspects of museum practices—especially concerning collection and curation, as well as exhibition—also invite philosophical scrutiny.

Many of the most discussed philosophical issues raised by museums and their practices are in the domain of ethics. Moral hazards attend the practice of both collection-building and collection-maintenance. In particular, there are pressing ethical issues that increasingly come to public attention surrounding the repatriation of cultural artefacts; while repatriation of such objects is a central goal of many local museums in former colonies, resisting it is a priority for many world-museums. Curators face ethical decisions about when repatriation is appropriate and when it is not (the case of the Parthenon Marbles, for instance, is well known), and they are frequently faced with the task of defending their concepts of property and ownership. Questions of propriety also arise. Are there any objects that it would be inappropriate to observe in the context of a museum? Particularly vexing are questions concerning displays involving human remains. If such objects are removed from public display, how should they be appropriately stored and in company with what? Philosophers have made important contributions to the ongoing debate about these and related questions of ethical interest.

Another set of philosophical questions concern objects that are, or have been, regarded as sacred. Does the inclusion of such objects

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within a museum collection somehow de-sacralize them? If so, to what extent do they then retain their value as museum exhibits? Are curators under any moral obligation to provide appropriate environments for the display of sacred objects? (Consider the lengths gone to by the curators of the World Museum Liverpool to create an appropriate exhibition space for their Buddhist artefacts—some of which were re-consecrated after their installation in the permanent exhibit.) What ethical questions are raised when members of the public wish to practise religious devotions in the proximity of artefacts within museum collections? Questions also arise about the boundary between a sacred object and a work of art. Should a museum's presentation of an object as a 'sacred object' preclude it being considered solely as an object of art or vice versa?

The function of museums as exhibitors of art clearly raises questions of immediate interest to philosophers. In collecting, organizing, and exhibiting material objects, art museums make accessible not only the material but also the non-material dimensions of those objects. This in turn raises the question of in what ways they facilitate or enhance an apprehension of aesthetic value. Many philosophers have given a great deal of attention to the discussion of art and to the experience of art, yet there has been comparatively little philosophical discussion focused on museums—despite the fact that a primary function of museums is to provide access to collections of art through public exhibitions. Museums also play a key role in defining what counts as art within a culture (as is explicit in the Institutional Theory of Art). Key philosophical questions in this area include: What concept or concepts of art are implicit in museums' practices of exhibition and collection? To what extent do these concepts determine what might be included in a museum collection and what might not be? By including an object in its collection and then exhibiting it a museum puts that object forward to the public as a work of art; but does a museum's handling of an object—for example, a piece of Shaker furniture—actually *make it into* a work of art? Is there anything more to a work of art than the fact that it has been selected for display and presented as something that the audience should or might take an interest in?

Curators face a host of important ontological questions concerning the categorization of the objects in their care. In addition to questions about what should be included in a museum's collection and what excluded, curators are faced with questions about what types of artefact should be categorized under the same headings. This is a question of great interest to metaphysicians and underlying it is the more fundamental question of what counts as an object. One common

understanding of objects divides them into two basic types: those that are the result of human activity and those that are not. But this distinction between artefacts and natural objects itself raises a host of questions of interest to philosophers.

The systems of object classification used by museums today still, by and large, reflect the understanding of the collectors of the nineteenth century, and it is widely recognized that many such systems are no longer helpful or appropriate. Aesthetic or religious considerations, for example, might not be well accommodated by systems of classification that focus on the distinction between artefacts and natural objects or by a method of categorization that is more attuned to the tangible features of material objects. The task of scrutinizing existing systems of classification and developing new ones requires philosophical work and there is growing recognition that curators and philosophers need to work together to accomplish this effectively.

Further philosophical questions arise from the construction of exhibitions that seek to educate the public about certain historical periods or parts of the world. A key part of this endeavour involves selecting objects that are able to represent something characteristic of the time period and society that is the focus of the exhibit. But what qualifies a particular object for this representational role? What criteria for the selection of such objects should be deployed? What, if anything, changes about the object when it is formally accepted as having such a representational role? Mereological questions—that is, ones concerning the relation between parts and wholes—cannot be avoided when one considers what is required for an object, or a collection of objects, to represent a whole time period or a culture. One might also wonder what mereology might contribute to the planning of exhibitions. Museum conservation practices also raise a number of ontological questions of interest to philosophers. At what point do conservation efforts threaten the identity of the object? Can restoration fundamentally change an object to the extent that its continued display amounts to public deception?

Museums clearly generate many important philosophical questions concerning professional ethics. What is the appropriate relationship between curatorship and other domains of human thought, action, and concern, especially matters to do with gender, race and community? What are the responsibilities of the curator? And to whom are curators responsible? What are the moral boundaries circumscribing what is an acceptable educational display and what is

an unacceptable promotion of some ideology on the part of a museum?

Despite the philosophical interest of such questions and the prominence of museums as public institutions, museums and their practices have until recently received surprisingly little scrutiny from philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition.[1] Philosophers have now begun taking up the long overdue task of bringing the analytic tools of philosophy to bear on the many questions raised by museums. However, there has been a history of mutual indifference to overcome. Despite being products of the same intellectual milieu, academic philosophy and the museum world have had surprisingly little contact. Academics specializing in other subjects, such as history, geology, and religious studies have had much more to do with museums than have philosophers. Part of the explanation for this is that museums are concerned with the same material objects that are of obvious interest to academics within many specific fields of study. Tellingly, there are museums of history, of religion, and even of mathematics;[2] but, as yet, there are no museums of philosophy. Likewise, there are philosophies of history, of religion, of science, and so on; but, as yet, the philosophy of museums is not widely acknowledged as a distinct sub-discipline of philosophy. It is perhaps understandable that, in the days when museums were regarded primarily as places in which material objects were collected and displayed for observation and study, curators might have found few common projects with philosophers, who typically have had more abstract concerns. Those days are, however, long past and there is now far more weight put on the process of interpretation and analysis within museums than was formerly the case. Curators are increasingly sensitive to the problems inherent in disclosing the meanings of the objects in their care. Exploring such problems opens the way for interactions which are fruitful for both philosophers and museum professionals.

By bringing together the work of philosophers who address some of the many questions that arise from museums and their practices, this volume seeks to dispel any lingering doubts that the philosophy of museums is a rich and legitimate sub-discipline of philosophy. It brings together contributions from philosophers with backgrounds

[1] Matters are otherwise with respect to Continental Philosophy and Critical Theory, both of which have an established history of engagement with museum theory.

[2] There is a museum of mathematics in New York, see http://momath.org/.

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in a spectrum of more traditional philosophical sub-disciplines, ranging from ethics, philosophy of language, the history of modern philosophy and philosophy of religion, through to aesthetics and metaphysics. The volume demonstrates how their work contributes to the understanding of museums and what light it sheds on the philosophical questions raised by museum practices.

As many of the essays in this volume make evident, philosophy of museums is of vital concern, not only to those philosophers at work in the emerging field but also to practitioners within the museum world. Indeed, many of the contributors to this volume bring a wealth of experience of practical engagement with museums and their practices to bear on their philosophical work.

In 'Museums and their Paradoxes', Mark O'Neill invites philosophers to enter into a conversation with museum practitioners. O'Neill is himself an influential figure in the domain of museums and cultural policy, and his essay is written from the perspective of a philosophically-informed practitioner. He draws attention to a number of questions which are of direct concern to museum practitioners, such as whether museums are best regarded as having intrinsic or instrumental value, or whether their main function should be to produce knowledge or to express communal identity. O'Neill's discussion of these questions is presented as a starting point for collaborative thinking between philosophers and those in the museum profession. He notes that the answers we give to such questions will have far-reaching practical implications at the level of both museum practice and public policy.

Charles Taliaferro takes up this conversation in 'The Open Museum and its Enemies: An Essay in the Philosophy of Museums'. Arguing that museums have great value as sites for the development of a philosophical culture, Taliaferro proposes a 'Philosophical Culture Museum Model' as a new way of thinking about the role of museums within liberal democracies. Both philosophy and museums, he argues, have foundational parts to play within such societies. He concludes that recognizing the philosophy of museums as a sub-field of philosophy that is now coming of age will assist both philosophers and museum professionals to contribute to the cultural foundations of democratic societies.

In the following essay, 'The Museum of Big Ideas', Ivan Gaskell enters into this discussion between philosophers and museum practitioners with a challenge to the latter. Museums, Gaskell charges, have lost the capacity to generate paradigm changing ideas. Having become mere echo chambers for transformative ideas proposed elsewhere, museums are no longer fulfilling their potential as institutions

that create knowledge. Gaskell analyses some of the factors that have led museums to this position, such as their commitment to long out-dated taxonomic and systematic divisions, and he considers some possible strategies that they might employ to extricate themselves. The most promising of these strategies, Gaskell argues, involves curators thinking beyond familiar boundaries and becoming more alert to the cultural and physical versatility possessed by tangible things. Finally, Gaskell proposes that this new exploration of tangible things that goes beyond the boundaries of familiar categories can be most effectively accomplished through collaboration between museum-based scholars and philosophers.

In 'Museums and the Nostalgic Self', Michael P. Levine steps back from the specific issues addressed by the previous essays in order to tackle the general question of what is a museum. In order to answer this question, Levine considers whether or not there is any set of properties shared by the diverse entities we call museums. He concludes that there is none, and that thinking that there is has led scholars to make unhelpful over-generalizations about museums. Levine then turns to examine the experiences people have when visiting museums. He argues that a central type of this experience is nostalgic. Museums, Levine then argues, are best understood as catering to our affectivity—our appetites, desires and wishes—and, as this is not principally a matter of cognition, we go wrong when we regard museums as primarily concerned to provide their visitors with information. Rather, what people seek in museums, Levine concludes, is a way of engaging with the past, both real and imagined. This conclusion is elaborated by means of a psychoanalytic account of art that, Levine proposes, can tell us a great deal about the nature of museums.

A contrasting perspective on museums and their practices is offered by Beth Lord in her contribution to this volume, '"A Sudden Surprise of the Soul": Wonder in Museums and Early Modern Philosophy'. Lord criticizes museum professionals who, in their efforts to create a certain kind of visitor experience, uncritically embrace a concept of wonder drawn from the early modern period. They fail to notice, she argues, that even in the seventeenth century philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza were highly critical of that concept because they believed that wonder was not a smooth pathway to knowledge. The problem with wonder is that it does not typically encourage further learning, as it overwhelms the mind with the unusual or spectacular. Deploying the critical resources found in Descartes' and Spinoza's writings on the topic of wonder, and focusing on natural history museums in particular, Lord suggests that museums practitioners would do well to set wonder aside and

focus instead on the feeling of joy that can be aroused when we come to understand the many connections that exist between ourselves and the natural world. Such joy, including as it does the joy of learning, can lead the museum visitor beyond the realm of pure feeling and towards knowledge more effectively than can wonder.

In 'Context and Experiencing the Sacred', David Brown likewise argues that museums should seek to do more than foster a particular kind of experience in their visitors. Brown's concerns are with the display of religious paintings and sacred objects in public museums and art galleries. Like Lord, he argues against museum practices that emphasize visitor experience at the expense of visitor education. This leads Brown to consider just how far a museum ought to go in acknowledging the original sacred context of the religious paintings or objects in their collections. If education is to be provided, rather than the mere elicitation of experience, museum visitors must be given enough information about the original contexts and functions of the religious artefacts. But how much is enough? Using specific examples to support his argument, Brown concludes that enough contextualizing information will have been provided when the possibility has been opened up for those viewing the objects to enjoy a religious experience, which may or may not be concomitant with an aesthetic one.

The themes of the nature of museums, visitor experience, education, and museum display practices with regard to the categorization of objects are picked up once more in the following essay. Paul Morrow's contribution to this volume, 'Are Holocaust Museums Unique?', focuses on a type of museum that is often regarded as unique within the museological literature. Morrow argues that this assessment is unwarranted if it is taken to mean that Holocaust museums are exempt from the ethical, ontological, epistemological and taxonomic questions that face museums more generally. Morrow begins his analysis by exploring some issues concerning the educational value of objects in Holocaust museums. He argues that this value is not intrinsic to the objects but emerges from the relations established between these objects in museum displays. The ability of particular objects to create strong feelings of revulsion in their viewers should not be allowed, Morrow argues, to disguise the fact that Holocaust museums are basically museums of history. The educational value of the objects in these museums then rests on their ability, in the context of displays, to provide the museum visitor with accurate information. This leads Morrow to a discussion of the epistemic function of Holocaust museums, in which he introduces the idea of a 'document-based epistemology'. Such an

epistemology is foundational, he argues, for all current Holocaust museums. In the light of this analysis, Morrow returns to the question of museum taxonomy. Should we categorize museums according to their field of study or according to their 'type', 'kind', or 'purpose', he asks. Morrow favours the purpose-based approach on the grounds that it is most reflective of the range of museum institutions that exist today, of which Holocaust museums are one 'non-unique' variety.

The objects included in the collections of Holocaust museums often raise testing ethical questions for those responsible for their curation and display, and this can also be the case with respect to the collections in other types of museum. In 'Museums, Ethics and Truth: Why Museums' Collecting Policies Must Face up to the Problem of Testimony', Philip Tonner argues that the responsibility of museums to collect objects and to communicate information about them in a truthful way requires that museum practitioners attend to issues concerning the epistemology of testimony. Tonner argues that museums are public spaces of memory, testimony, representation and interpretation that enable those who transgress against humanity to be held accountable, while at the same time holding those who witness against the transgressors accountable to standards of truthfulness. Tonner develops his argument using the case of a ring of that was donated to the United States Holocaust Museum by a Holocaust survivor. Setting out a bold ethical agenda for museums, Tonner explains how objects, such as this ring, which are the material testimony to atrocities, can function within museum collections as public acts of memory that constitute ongoing resistance to injustice.

In 'The Ethics of Trusteeship and the Biography of Objects', Andreas Pantazatos provides a new framework for understanding both the duties that museum trustees have to the objects in their collections and the obligations they have towards the public. Museum trustees are entrusted, Pantazatos argues, to ensure that the objects they are responsible for are safely transited to the future. But this process of transit is more complex than it might initially seem once we pay attention to what exactly it is that trustees are entrusted with. Pantazatos employs the 'biography of objects' method to argue that the objects in question are not merely material objects, rather they are constituted by the meanings people have given them and will come to give them in the future. These meanings are the subject of negotiation; and it is the duty to perform such negotiation diligently that museum trustees have assumed on behalf of the public. In this essay, Pantazatos argues that we can understand the ethical demands of trusteeship by employing a triangular framework that takes into account the biography of objects, an appropriate notion

of trust, and the idea that trustees are charged with the ongoing task of negotiating what is transferred to the future.

In 'People and Things: Questions Museums Make us Ask and Answer', Alda Rodrigues takes up the question of what constitutes a museum object. Her focus is specifically on works of art, and she considers the views of two authors—Quatremère de Quincy and Heidegger—who both claim that art works are not just material objects but are also networks of associated practices, values, beliefs, traditions, memories, and so on. As Rodrigues explains, this view invites one to be highly critical of museums. Yet, with the help of an account of the interconnections between the material world and human concepts drawn from Donald Davidson, Rodrigues argues that such a critical attitude to museums is unwarranted. Museums can be regarded as philosophical instruments which allow us to explore the networks of meaning that partly constitute museum objects. Moreover, by displaying these objects museums ensure that they remain available to our experience and are allowed to enter into new networks of meaning; those which are brought to the museum by its visitors, who thereby have an active role in making the objects what they are.

Graham Oddie also addresses questions concerning museum objects in 'What Do we See in Museums?'. Two related questions form the core of Oddie's essay. What value is there in visiting a museums and becoming acquainted with the objects on display? To what ontological type or category do museum objects belong? In answering these questions, Oddie's concern is with non-art museums and he discusses two types of object: 'special' and 'typical' objects. Oddie argues that both special objects and typical objects are *abstracta* not *concreta*, and he concludes that the objects on a museum's inventory are in fact roles that can be more or less determinate and are played by concrete material particulars. The particular special object he focuses on in developing his argument is Tutankahmun's death mask. Finally, Oddie explores the implications of his analysis of the ontology of museum objects for the way we think about the value of museum experiences, the significance of preservation, and the goals of restoration.

In 'An Honest Display of Fakery: Replicas and the Role of Museums', Constantine Sandis takes up the question of what is important to us about the objects in a museum's collection. Unlike Oddie, Sandis is especially concerned with artworks. He asks whether what we find of aesthetic value in such works can be detached from any value we attach to the provenance of the work. We are behaving fetishistically, he argues, when we value an original work

more highly than a replica purely because it is an original. Moreover, our tendency to value originals more highly than replicas can get us into trouble if we don't pay sufficient attention to the purpose of the work within a display or exhibit. If that purpose is educational, for instance, then a replica may well better serve it than an original. The argument is then extended to explore the different roles that replicas might legitimately play in various types of museum.

The claim that the objects in museums are not physical objects is the point of departure for the next essay, in which Garry L. Hagberg develops a Wittgensteinian account of the relation between objects and their meanings. In 'Word and Object: Museums and the Matter of Meaning', Hagberg argues that we go astray if we think of works of art as possessors of meaning and museums as places where that meaning can be exhibited and encountered. In an argument that is richly illustrated with examples of work by Rembrandt, Rietveld, and others, Hagberg makes the case that by considering how meaning is understood in use-based theories of language, such as that proposed by Wittgenstein, we can gain a better account of the meanings of the objects we find in museums. By considering art and its exhibition in museums by means of an analogy with natural language, Hagberg concludes that these meanings are not univocally attached to particular material objects, but are created by viewers within the interactive context provided by the museum.

In 'Framing Effects in Museum Narratives: Objectivity in Interpretation Revisited', contributing editor Anna Bergqvist pursues the question of how museums convey meaning through the objects exhibited in them. Bergqvist's approach focuses on, what she identifies as, the narrative aspect of museum exhibits: organized collections of artefacts that have been put together in order to tell a story. Bringing to the fore the notions of perspective and point of view, as these relate to museum practices of narrative construction, Bergqvist considers how these connect to debates in contemporary philosophical aesthetics about authorial intention as well as to more general questions about interpretation and objectivity in art. Noting a trend within museological studies to emphasize the museums visitor's role in the creation of the meaning of museum objects, Bergqvist explains the contrast between this view and the view it opposes, namely, that curators are primarily responsible for determining the meaning of the objects in their displays. Bergqvist's account seeks a balance between these two extreme views. It is premised on a theory called semantic particularism, according to which linguistic meaning is to be explained in terms of both the intentions of competent

speakers-hearers and the norm-governed linguistic practices they are engaged in. Bergqvist deploys this theory to generate a novel account of the meaning of objects within museum exhibitions. The meaning of the objects on display in museums cannot be accessed, she argues, except through a perspective; and we can regard museum exhibitions as offering different perspectives on objects, but this does not entail that an object's meaning can be reduced to any single perspective. Ultimately, the value of museum exhibitions, Bergqvist concludes, is that they offer viewers opportunities to reflect on how they see the world by presenting the objects in it to them from a particular point of view.

The idea that art is an opportunity, and that museums are sites of opportunity, is at the forefront of the final essay of this volume. In 'The Participatory Art Museum: Approached from a Philosophical Perspective', Sarah Hegenbart analyses the character of participatory art and participatory art museums. The argument is developed alongside an analysis of Christoph Schlingensief's *Opera Village Africa*, which is a purpose built site for the creation of art within life. This revolutionary project, Hegenbart argues, forces us to expand our understanding of the value of art. Unlike the value of traditional artworks, which has often been regarded as independent of the viewer (*pace* Hagberg and Bergqvist), the value of participatory art is created by the participants. Moreover, Hegenbart argues that participatory art has a twofold character; because of its embeddedness within the actual life of its creators, participatory art is inextricably both aesthetic and ethical. Hegenbart claims that existing theories of participatory art do not adequately explain the connection between aesthetic and ethical values that they presuppose. She proposes that an account based on virtue ethics is needed to explain the values that we find in participatory art and to explain how those values are created in the artistic process. Turning her attention back to the notion of a participatory art museum, Hegenbart compares such a museum to the Athenian *agora*. Just as the *agora* was a site of philosophical dialogue in which people were invited to engage and thereby be transformed, so the participatory art museum can be regarded as a twenty-first century *agora* in which people are invited to be transformed by their participation in the artistic process.

The fifteen essays in this volume, each exploring a different furrow of the rich field of philosophy of museums, were originally presented at a conference held at the University of Glasgow in the summer of 2013 on 'Philosophy of Museums: Ethics, Aesthetics and Ontology'. One aim of this conference was to encourage philosophers who were established in other fields of philosophy to apply their

talents to this developing area. But the conference also aimed to encourage younger scholars to become involved in this emergent area of philosophy. To this latter end, in the academic year prior to the conference, a team of pupils from Hutchesons' Grammar School in Glasgow carried out research projects that culminated in presentations during the conference. Leon Robinson introduces the Hutchesons' Grammar School Project in the Appendix to this volume, and the two papers that have resulted from it are reproduced there: 'Foucault, Madness and Museums', by Glen Melville, Scott Adams and Lucy McCracken, and 'The Identity of Museum Objects', by Jessica Palmer and Claire Richmond.

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