

On the Analogy between Artworks and Selves

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ABSTRACT | A distinctive feature of Margolis' work is the striking analogy he draws between selves and artworks. The thread in the analogy that I explore here concerns how the constitution of specific artworks and persons can reveal general features of the culture out of which they spring and, in doing so, convey a form of social knowledge that often has an important ethical dimension. I argue that Margolis helps us see that each is freighted with what we might call culturally reflexive meaning, and here I motivate a sense of the significance of this form of meaning.

KEYWORDS | Selfhood; Art; Meaning; Interpretation; Embodiment; Culture

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I

Given the nature of the occasion, I will permit myself to begin with a few words about Margolis the person, and I trust that what I say here will help stage the issues I wish to explore about Margolis the philosopher. Despite the fact that Margolis' life extended for nearly a century, his passing felt premature, since he seemed, much as the history of art in his work did, constitutionally opposed to conclusion or closure. This places the burden on those who knew him of figuring out how to organize our many "Joe-stories"—note that a Joe-story is an acknowledged genre—since his story has, in fact, concluded. Margolis told many stories, but there were a handful that seemed important to him because they yielded a particular image of his life. Those who knew him understood that his stories demonstrated performatively what his writings did philosophically: humans are essentially "self-interpreting texts" (Margolis 2001, 158).¹ It was a privilege to be an audience to these Joe-stories as it was an occasion to witness such a unique and complex text engaged in an act of self-interpretation.

Many of his stories concerned his childhood. He was raised in Newark, the son of a dentist, but his heart belonged to the thronging immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Manhattan, and he would often recite stories about the exhilarating chaos of cultures he would experience when visiting family there. These stories frequently featured gaggles of Jewish, Italian, Irish, and Native American kids—this would have been the 1930s—whose behavior on the streets explained much of the delightful mayhem. Margolis relished the fact that his stories painted him as a witness to this particular moment in the history of this particular city. It was a point in the history of the city when the children of these communities grew up to produce a remarkable amount of local culture, and Margolis clearly identified with the kinds of music, poetry, painting, and theater that were flourishing in the New York of his youth. For Margolis, all of this provided what was in effect his origin story: he came from a city that was like *that*, and he was connected to experiences and forms of life of *this* sort. I cannot say what these stories meant to Margolis, but it was clearly important that both we and he think of his life in light of them.

It was always tempting to take these and similar stories as explaining Margolis' abiding commitment to the fundamental explanatory power of culture. It is also tempting to hear in these stories a hint as to why he assigned aesthetics a privileged role in his philosophical system and found in relativism the best framework for understanding art. For Margolis, there is art at the very core of life, and artistry is visible in the kinds of cultural practice that, in his philosophical system, give rise to everything from symphonies to selfhood. His insistence on relativism, one suspects, was in part motivated by his desire to respect the

¹ See also Margolis (1978, 1993, & 1995).

“flux”—to use a term he and Heraclitians privilege—of cultural life that mesmerized him as a child, and it likely gave partial ground to his confidence that one, “cannot have a theory of interpretation regarding art or the rest of the cultural world of humans that does not accommodate the relativistic option” (Margolis 2017, 45). Add to this his commitment to a version of cultural *realism*, and we have a sense of why Margolis thought that being a relativist was the highest compliment a philosopher can pay to the immense creative power of social life.

In what follows I want to explore a feature of the entanglement of culture, art, and selfhood in Margolis’ work. Stanley Cavell wrote that we often treat artworks, “in ways normally reserved for treating persons” (Cavell 1969, 189). Margolis shares this view but extends it well beyond an analogy of *treatment* to one, effectively, of *constitution*. In his body of work there is a striking analogy between selves and artworks, as jointly the prize creations of culture. And his theories imply that we cannot understand why we often extend similar forms of, say, admiration or respect to both unless we also illuminate how artworks and persons bear similar structures of intentionality, culture, and value such that we can explain why it makes sense to treat them in allied ways. He is best known for his oft-repeated claim that artworks and selves are *physically embodied and culturally emergent*, and it is fair to say that his interest was primarily in understanding the social grounds of both the genesis and interpretation of persons, paintings and other such culturally constituted objects.

His approach to these issues is what he terms a “philosophical anthropology.”² The question I am interested in is orthogonal to his interests, and it is essentially an exercise in value theory. The thread in the analogy that I want to explore here concerns how the constitution of specific artworks and persons can reveal general features of the culture out of which they spring and, in doing so, convey a form of social knowledge that often has an important ethical dimension. In the case of each, I will suggest, this enables forms of sympathetic attention and empathic understanding that does much to strengthen the analogy between artworks and selves that Margolis did so much to bring to the attention of philosophy. As one would expect of Margolis’ maverick approach to philosophy, he opens up a way of thinking about the analogy that slightly changes the terms of the debate and offers an alternative rather than contribution to familiar approaches to this topic.

² Hence his 2009 book titled *The Arts and the Definition of the Human: Toward a Philosophical Anthropology*.

II

One challenge of Margolis' work is that his various ways of explaining this analogy can appear to analogize art and selves not just to each other but to nearly every other creature of culture, which, by the lights of his own theory, coextends with everything under the sun that requires human hands to come into existence. His work shows the *artifactual* nature of fixtures of the human world, and so what one wants to know is why certain of these artifacts such as artworks and persons matter more than others. Despite Margolis' reputation as one of the twentieth century's preeminent philosophers of art, he is, at heart, a philosopher of culture. Margolis' theory of culture grounds his radical historicism, his theory of emergence, his philosophy of interpretation, his relativism, his account of Intentionality—always with a capital I, for reasons I will elaborate in a moment—as well his work on the ontology of art and persons. The sweep of his work is striking and in it all roads lead to culture. But if this is so, what is so special about art and selfhood that is not, say, equally special about any culturally articulated feature of our world?

Another challenge is to account for how Margolis' work distinguishes him from the legions of philosophers on both sides of the continental/analytic divide who are likewise committed to irreducibly social forms of explanation. Vast swaths of postwar philosophy assert the basic role of cultural practice in making available, and in turn determining the limits of, shared forms of meaning, mindedness, selfhood, art, and value. Certainly part of what makes Margolis unique is how liberally he draws from one school of thought to stage a critique of another, and his habit of combining disparate traditions into a system could often make him appear, in effect, philosophically homeless, though later in his career American Pragmatism furnished something of a permanent residence. His radical versions of historicism and relativism, his distrust of methodological individualism and psychologizing forms of intentionalism, his cavalier declarations to the effect that all the world's a text—all of this could make him seem a Marxist postructuralist disguised as an analytic philosopher. Yet his grand system-building, confidence in the creative power of culture, and willingness to proffer positive theses about the extraordinary emergence of humans—historically out of primates and individually out of infants, each of which he terms a "paradox"³—could make him seem an unrepentant humanist, something most of his disenchanted continental allies would never tolerate. His career followed the scores of other postwar philosophers who took a decidedly social version of the so-called Linguistic Turn, but he did so in a remarkable, and remarkably idiosyncratic, manner.

All these features of Margolis' work are on display in virtually every book he has written since the 1980s. A particularly apt example of it can be found in his

3 See Margolis (2017) which is his most extended study of these "paradoxes" of personhood.

2010 *The Cultural Space of the Arts and the Infelicities of Reductionism*, and his argument there will help stage the point I wish to make here. While his target is, as the title suggests, a critique of reductive programs in analytic philosophy, his argument matters to mine because of the great clarity it brings to his insistence on the primacy of culture.

The animus that motivates Margolis' critique is that "reductionism," in its most hard-nosed naturalistic forms, calls on us to form an image of artworks and selves as emptied of precisely what makes them the things that they are. Thus for Margolis the image we get of a human "*at the neural or subpersonal level*" (Margolis 2010, 80) or of a painting at the purely physical level cannot be called an image of a self or an artwork at all. Reductive moves ask us to imagine an object as the thing it is now shorn of a certain dimension. If that dimension is cultural in nature, we are asked to reform our image so that the cultural is replaced with something more basic and different in kind. Or it is jettisoned entirely, as so much socially constructed illusion. In either case, if it is a self or a work of art we are considering, we lose the very grounds that justify describing our image *as of a* self or a work of art. For Margolis, the cultural does not designate a set of properties an artwork or a person bears that we may subtract from or add to our understanding of it. The cultural dimension is, as Wittgenstein might say, *bedrock*, beneath which we cannot go. To ask what grounds *it*—and to expect an answer to identify some substrate of nature now purified of the cultural—is therefore an exercise in missing the point. Like Heidegger's hammer, getting what persons and artworks *are* can only be captured by situating our thought of each in a network of social practices and shared meanings that effectively determine the very conditions of identity of these kinds of artifact. This demands that we attend to the ways in which they are, in Margolis's parlance, "enlanguaged" and "enculturated" and so embedded in a *lebensform* whose character in part determines theirs.⁴ The cultural and the natural cannot, for Margolis, be prised fully apart in either our experience or understanding of such artifacts, and this, he argues, is what reductionists routinely fail to see. The irony, thus, is that reductionists are the ones whose talk turns out to be empty when they characterize a certain configuration of matter and tell us that *this* is what a minded creature or a painted object really is.

In the case of philosophy of art, Margolis sees just this move at play in the hugely influential theories of Arthur Danto, Richard Wollheim, and Kendall Walton. At first blush Margolis' charge seems bizarre: Danto and Walton of course make artworld *institutions* and *games* of make-believe central to their respective theories, and Wollheim's work is nothing if not an attempt to explain exactly how we perceive an artwork *as a* work of art. Margolis' complaint is that in making their cases, they all implicitly invoke an image of an artwork as a mere mate-

⁴ For an excellent recent account of Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life and the distinctive way it establishes "bedrock", see Boncompagni (2022).

rial thing upon which we foist an interpretation, fiction, or imaginative projection to yield an account of how we come to see a mere thing as aesthetically and artistically enriched. For Wollheim, making sense of how I see, say, a man playing guitar in a configuration of differently colored cubes rests in act of “seeing in,” and his account of this gets afoot by asking us to consider that what is actually materially present to us is just a marked canvass. In Danto’s account of the transfiguration of the commonplace—which, it must be said, can sound very similar to Margolis’ own account of emergence—we are asked to conceive of a readymade alongside a physically identical thing that is not a work of art. In explaining how one can be an artwork and the other not, Danto situates one in “atmosphere” of ideas that constitutes an artworld, and thus it can be only in a highly figurative, essentially interpretative, sense that we “see” it as an artwork, that is, *see* art in the thing itself and not in something rather different: an enfranchising interpretation of it (Margolis 2021, 39). And for Walton, to perceive a painting requires treating the colored canvass as a prop that supports a game of make-believe, and thus, it would seem, his theory too implies us that what is *actually* present to us is a dull bit of matter that becomes “Intentionally and culturally freighted” only when *used* in a particularly imaginative manner.

I make no claim that Margolis’s criticism of any of these philosophers is fair. But the line of argument tells us much about Margolis’ own view of art. “The artwork *is* the living ‘utterance’ of the living artist” (Margolis 2010, 56), he tells us, and he insists that what artists create is immediately present to perception as *living*, that is, as suffused with significance and meaning. Of course, all parties to the debate, Margolis included, must acknowledge that in art-making, a mere thing is in some manner remade as an artifact, and thus there is a conceptual distinction between the work of art and the things and stuff in which its natural history begins. His critique of Danto, Wollheim, and Walton has to do with how each countenances a kind of doubleness in the perception of artworks that retains a noxious sense that, “*what* is actually seen is never more than a physical canvass covered with paint” (Margolis 2021, 31) even as we are seeing that of which this colored surface is a depiction. For Margolis, this amounts to the sin of all the basic forms of reductionism he disdains, and it applies to selves just as it does to artworks: enshrining a basic separation between nature and culture in our sense of how these special artifacts are present to us, in either experience or understanding.

But what is the Intentional, in Margolis’s distinctive sense, and why does he think culture is so central to it? Roberta Dreon offers a very helpful characterization:

For Margolis Intentionality is strictly connected to the social character of human conditions: by Intentional properties he means those attributes we can ascribe to something or someone because they are already embedded within a shared world of practices; those practices

are essentially connected to the fact that from birth we have to learn a natural language from a social group and to acquire the informal rules governing a certain common form of life. (Dreon 2017, 13)⁵

For Margolis, Intentionality ranges over the constellation of semantic, affective, and aesthetic properties that selves and artworks may bear. But as Dreon captures so well, and very much unlike in much analytic philosophy, in Margolis' work the Intentional does not function to designate the kind of essentially *individual* world-directed psychological states that are declared in communicative intentions and the like: the fabled Smith or Jones of a certain kind of ordinary language philosophy who attempts to convey X by saying Y. In Margolis's work, the Intentional is best understood as that which makes manifest the "real presence of an actual cultural world" (Margolis 2010, 16) *in* a particular self or artwork. If this sounds odd, it should not. The Intentions found in an artwork are of course at times selected by and channeled through an individual will. But for Margolis the kind of agency exercised here is a matter of harnessing possibilities of expression that are already written into the social world in which ordinary speakers as well as artists find themselves. And Margolis asks us to see that this world is inevitably made present through their expressive behavior. My ability to formulate a sentence that conveys my anger at your betrayal of our friendship implies a story of prior cultural labor whose work is, if you will, simply continued through my utterance. The story of how I can convey this will include reference to everything our culture must first do for it to be possible for me to see another as a *friend*, as *having certain responsibilities to me*, as capable of behaving in such a way as to be *disloyal*, and *anger* rather than *romantic jealousy* as an appropriate response. All these forms of thought and feeling—characteristic of individual mental states—are certainly in me yet are there only because of the manner in which I am in a structure of social relations and cultural practices that ultimately give my thoughts and emotions their shared public profile. Hence my ability to communicate my anger and its grounds to you with a frown that is *just so*. In such acts, these grounds are made visible to you just as my mental state is, and it is important that this be so, since you too must harness these common cultural resources when "getting" my frown.

What we have said about selves is also true of artworks and the ways they are present to us. Each is "freighted" with what we might call *culturally reflexive meaning*. That is, the distinctive way they house structures of Intentionality is sufficiently rich and complex that *in* their expressive activity we see not just how this self or that painting hangs together but something about how our culture and hence our world hangs together, too.⁶ The animating idea in Margolis' work seems to be that they do so in a way that is *exemplary*, that is, of all the artifacts

5 My paper is throughout indebted to Dreon's excellent survey of Margolis' work here, which function as the introduction to his *The Three Paradoxes of Personhood: The Venetian Lectures*.

6 I discuss these and related issues in Gibson (2013, 2017, & 2018).

that constitute the human world, selves and artworks most perspicuously display this form of meaning. Strictly speaking, all artifacts will bear a measure of culturally reflexive meaning: for instance, cradles, vanity tables, and coffins will surely bear forms of social meaning and hence illuminate, to a degree, how we humans are in the world. But usually they will not do so to such an extraordinary and explicit degree, and it typically will be neither their point nor purpose to bear and convey this meaning in ways that permit us to apply the vocabulary of “expression” to how they display it. What aligns the human and artistic artifact is the fact that they are jointly the cultural objects that best embody, articulate, and make into objects of interpretation an especially significant form of culturally reflexive meaning. Put plainly, it is their social role to speak on behalf of us and our shared form of life, and it is, as it were, written into the form of an artwork or the character of a person to display these forms of meaning. Artworks and selves therefore play a privileged role in making such forms of culturally articulated meaning a subject of philosophical reflection. If in Margolis’ work all roads lead to culture, I take it that this feature of the analogy explains why he is assured that when we reach our destination what we will specifically find are persons and the art they produce.

III

We can now return to a distinction I drew earlier between approaching the self/artwork analogy by way of a consideration of similarities in *treatment* or *constitution*. Part of the significance of Margolis’ work is to show us that we need an account of how selves and artworks hang together as the kinds of things that they are—analogous forms of constitution—if we are to make headway in debates on similarities in forms of treatment. Compare, for instance, how much different this analogy looks here than in work that approaches it by way of a consideration of *reactive attitudes*, which has received the lion’s share of attention by those who take a treatment approach. The notion of a reactive attitude, recall, was popularized by P. F. Strawson, who frames such attitudes as responses to the quality of another’s “will” as manifested in their behavior.⁷ Hence we might appropriately feel gratitude, resentment, respect, disdain, admiration, love, and much else besides, in respect to another self because of how the quality of their will is declared to us through their speech and actions. And surely we at times take ourselves to experience something at least *like* these reactive attitudes to works of art, just as Cavell captured in the passage quoted above. The philosophical question that animates this approach to the analogy is, exactly as one would expect, what justifies our treating works of art in such a way. *Ex hypothesi*, artworks haven’t anything in them that is analogous to a will, that is, a

⁷ See especially Strawson (1962).

psychological interior the quality of which can act as an appropriate target of respect, admiration, disdain, etc.

Yet note that when philosophers develop the analogy according to a treatment model, we often find them implicitly embrace something like the very reductionism that Margolis spends so much time trying to excise from aesthetics. Hence Susan Wolf argues that reactive attitudes towards art works really take the psychological states of *artists* as their objects, since, it seems, a marked surface is not sufficiently psychologically rich to act as a literal or appropriate target of a reactive attitude.⁸ Note too that the quality of a particular self's "will", on this model, can seem to tell us something deep about how they are constituted, while identifying the quality of an artwork's aesthetic structure does not, at least in the not relevant way, that is, in a way that would provide philosophical grounds for the analogy that interests us. And so there is bound to seem a great philosophical question about why we nonetheless treat selves and artworks in aligned manners. As least if we approach the analogy along these lines. It begins on the assumption that selves and artworks are not constituted in relevantly similar ways and thus analogies in our reactive attitudes are bound to mystify. This explains why Wolf must look beyond the work of art to its artist to give domicile to a subject the quality of whose will can come to matter to us.

Margolis sets the ground of the analogy by first establishing relevantly similar ways selves and artworks are constituted and, having done this, takes himself to have dispelled the sense of mystery, that is, of a deep *disanalogy* between the two things we persist in treating as of a piece. He does this in part by refusing to thoroughly psychologize our sense of the problem, as Wolf does. Instead, he makes it a matter of shared structures of Intentionality, in his distinctive sense of Intentionality. Put crudely, where most philosophers, like Wolf, see the analogy as obliging a search for a psychological dimension in art, Margolis shows that we can arrive at the desired destination if we instead treat it as a search for a sociological one. In fact, just as one would expect of a contrarian such as Margolis, he turns common practice in this debate on its head: rather than psychologize artworks, he "artifactualizes" selves, making persons seem as though artworks rather than the other way round. Persons are artifacts much as artworks are because self-constitution is at root a fact of social bootstrapping, and the stories we tell of its successes and failures are not primarily or exhaustively a tale of one person's ability to make themselves into this or that but of how our form of life, in effect, can distribute rich forms of Intentionality across, in his words, "selves and other texts."

Note that it is not at all the case that Margolis believes that the mental agency of individual selves plays no role in this. We are always free to interpret

8 See Wolf (2015 & 2016). For discussion of this, I am very grateful to Robbie Kubala, whose keynote at the 2022 Southern aesthetics Workshop discussed these issues in depth and influenced my thinking here, though I make no claim to representing his views accurately or otherwise saying anything he might agree with. See Kubala (2018 & 2020) for examples of his general approach to these issues.

the behavior of a person, artists included, in purely psychological terms. It is just that this level of interpretation is explanatorily *weak* since it cannot explain *how* a self and or artwork has thus and such character or quality without reverting to culture and how it provides us with shared, public resources for *making* things with this or that kind of identity. For Margolis, the problem with theories that make everything hang on descriptions of *individual* expressions of agency—think of common internationalist accounts of interpretation—is not that they describe fictions, as though individual minds are a myth. They do not. It is rather that the forms of cultural interpretation that Margolis motivates can illuminate much more philosophically interesting matters, namely, the relevant conditions of possibility for such acts. It may be the case that I, as an lyric poet, chose to write a sonnet rather than a villanelle, or that I, as a self, opted to become a poet rather than a novelist; but in either case the story of what I did begins and ends with tale of cultural labor: with how and why we *make things* such as poems and persons that are this way rather than that. All sorts of things may happen on the “inside.” Artists are, in Aili Whalen’s phrase, “cultural agents”, and, as such, our expressive behavior serves to make features of the social world visible, even when describing what we take to be merely our own choices, histories, and mental states.⁹ As a Wittgensteinian, Margolis’s point is that private psychological states explain too little, not that nothing happens there. As a Pragmatist, Margolis’s point is that the story of self- and art-making is only philosophically interesting if it casts light on how and why *we* make things that permit forms of social meaning and collective flourishing. We often fail at this, of course. But failure too reveals something about the quality of the shared stage upon which we perform our individual roles. It is the quality of both the stage and the array of roles available to us that Margolis wishes to emphasize. This is what is made visible, in both my acts of art-making and identity formation. Hence the forms of meaning displayed in these acts are, again, by their very nature culturally reflexive.

But still, one wants to know, exactly how does Margolis’ habit of distributing Intentionality across human and artistic artifacts so equally demystify the matter of treatment? It takes from us the sense that there is a radical difference in kind between selves and artworks, and it also endows artworks, if not with an individual will, then with something grander and just as “living”, to wit, *our* culture and the “we” of collective social life. It is open to us, I suppose, to go on to argue that Margolis can thus help us explain how standard kinds of reactive attitudes can take artworks as well as persons as their target and so justify our sense that at times we can feel love, gratitude, admiration, or a sense of moral

⁹ Aili Whalen (formerly Breshnahan) puts the point in these terms: for Margolis we are primarily “cultural agents” whose internal acts of creativity are always expressions of “external *Bildung*,” which betokens a, “situated, human evolutionary and culturally developed process which enables him or her to be a ‘second-natured’ site of linguistic and cultural competence.” See Whalen (2015, 200-201). My argument here is indebted to Whalen’s paper.

obligation to the paintings and poems. But such a move strikes me as betraying both Margolis' philosophical temperament and the radical spirit of his work on the analogy. These kinds of reactive attitude that typically matter to those who take a treatment approach are, like romantic love itself, forms of "singular" attachment to, as it were, what is individual about an individual, for instance, the specific quality of their "will." It is very hard to imagine Margolis sympathetic to this. He would not wish to deny that it happens, but the sentimentalism and, arguably, fetishism of it runs afoul of both the philosophical and moral reasons that underwrite his methodological anti-individualism. And for the reasons just canvassed, he would likely think that *even when we do experience such forms of singular attachment*, when interpreted wisely and justly, we will find they function to make features of our shared social world an object of interest and immersion. Margolis is in effect a cognitivist about art, in the sense that his interest is in how artworks hold in place and make visible a common world and the forms of social activity that sustain it. If the work of art is apt for turning something into an object of care, concern, and ethical investment, for Margolis it will likely be something public and general, for example the "living" human world as manifested in the work and nothing like an "individual will." Our affective and moral immersion in a work of art is, for Margolis, fundamentally social in nature, and he would likely insist that more singular forms of attachment, while now less mysterious, are, again, an exercise in missing the point. He would also insist that the same is true of our attachment to other selves, since even romantic love and friendship, singular as they may feel, are simply the most intimate ways in which we engage in sociality.

To use unMargolisian terms to conclude my discussion of where Margolis leaves us with this analogy: both selves and works of art embody an orientation in thought and feeling to the world. They are, that is, embodied *perspectives*, perhaps in addition to much else but this is one way of putting their basic form. A painting represents *this way* of thinking and feeling about its subject matter; a person hangs together as she does because of her cognitive and affective orientation to the world. A poem or a painting organizes this orientation in thought and feeling in its very form, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the character or personality of a person does so as well, even if this "character" is subjected to constant modification. This is, in an ordinary sense, just what it means to be a person or a work of art. They are both, among much else, embodied perspectives, and it is part of their social and expressive natures that they be so, since this is in large part what they convey: a perspective. In this respect, there is a deep formal analogy between what each *is*. The perspectives they embody are ultimately the consequence of the specific way in which each organizes, interprets, and reflects this human world that each strives to make sense of. This is why the kind of meaning they produce is essentially cultural *and* reflexive. If Margolis does not help us justify experiences of singular attachment, at least to

artworks, everything I have said here shows that forms of sympathetic and empathic understanding are invited, and that these perspectives are, as interesting perspectives often are, proper objects of immersion, interest, and concern.

IV

In conclusion, allow me to return to Margolis the person. As I remarked above, he embodied, in a striking manner, many of the basic ideas from his massive body of work. One idea, which has been my focus, is that humans are in a crucial sense analogous to artworks: they are culturally emergent entities that constitute themselves through creative expressive activity. And of course Margolis himself, as I also remarked above, took this very seriously in his personal life. He was a self-stylized person if there ever one was, working on his manners, gestures, and the rhythms and ticks of his speech, even his writing, so that they all *expressed him*. But more striking, I think, is how he embodied a feature of the position he is most famous for but which I have largely ignored here. Margolis was renowned for being a relativist, and this was well before it was fashionable to be such a thing. According to the letter and the spirit of his work, we should never expect interpretive closure. Interpretation, even of the simplest artwork or person, can in principle go on and on indefinitely. Yet Margolis as a person went on and on and on and on, as though he was his own theory made flesh. His life went on and on—nearly a hundred years of it—and anyone who saw him at a conference knew that his questions, bless him, could go on and on; and of course his writing went on and on, nearly 40 books and entirely too many articles to be worth counting. Margolis simply didn't stop. It seems impossible, unimaginable, that he is no longer with us. We have lost a great philosopher and a marvelous work of art.

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