

Matthew Kieran  
Dominic McIver Lopes  
*Editors*

PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES SERIES 107

# Knowing Art

*Essays in Aesthetics  
and Epistemology*



Springer

KNOWING ART

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## PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES SERIES

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# KNOWING ART

Essays in Aesthetics  
and Epistemology

*Edited by*

MATTHEW KIERAN

*University of Leeds, U.K.*

and

DOMINIC MCIVER LOPES

*University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada*

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Matthew Kieran  
Dominic McIver Lopes



## Notes on Contributors

Stacie Friend is a lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research focuses on issues at the intersection of aesthetics, mind, and language, especially as these concern our imaginative engagement with narrative fiction.

Peter Goldie is Samuel Hall Chair and Head of Philosophy at the University of Manchester. Before moving to Manchester in 2005, he was Reader in Philosophy at King's College London. His main philosophical interests are in the philosophy of mind, ethics, and aesthetics, and particularly in questions concerning value and how the mind engages with value.

Robert Hopkins is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield. Much of his research lies at the intersection of aesthetics and the philosophy of mind. He has recently published papers on Molyneux's question, sculpture, and the problem of aesthetic indistinguishables. He is currently struggling with a series of papers on the imagination.

Matthew Kieran is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Revealing Art* (Routledge, 2005), editor of *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Blackwell, 2006) and co-editor of *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (Routledge, 2003).

Keith Lehrer is Regents Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona. He is the author of seven books, including, most recently, *Self Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge and Autonomy* (Oxford, 1997), and many papers, including papers in aesthetics. He is also a painter whose work has been exhibited in Europe and the United States.

Dominic McIver Lopes is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Understanding*

*Pictures* (Oxford, 1996) and *Sight and Sensibility: Evaluating Pictures* (Oxford, 2005), and he has co-edited several collections like this one.

Derek Matravers was educated at University College London and Cambridge, and now lectures in philosophy at the Open University. He is a Fellow Commoner at Jesus College, Cambridge. He is the author of *Art and Emotion* (Oxford, 1998) and numerous articles in aesthetics and in ethics; and he is currently working on *Value*, to be published by Acumen Press.

Aaron Meskin is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Leeds. His work primarily focuses on issues in aesthetics and philosophical psychology, and his current research interests include the nature of the imagination, the prospects for defining art, and the under-appreciated art of the comic.

Jesse Prinz is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His most recent book, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford, forthcoming), concerns the role of emotions in grounding moral values, and he is currently extending these ideas to aesthetics.

James Shelley, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Auburn University, is the author of papers on aesthetic judgment, aesthetic value, aesthetic properties, eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, and tragedy. He is currently writing a book on David Hume's theory of taste.

Kathleen Stock is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sussex. She has published a number of articles on the imagination, especially in relation to fiction, and on definitions of art. She is editor of *Experience, Meaning and Work*, a forthcoming collection of new writing on the philosophy of music, and she is currently writing a monograph on the imagination.

Dustin Stokes is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Research in Cognitive Science at the University of Sussex. He works primarily on creativity, imagination, and perception in relation to the arts. He is currently a member of an interdisciplinary research team working on creativity, cognition, artificial life and intelligence, and aesthetics.

## Introduction

Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes

We often think of art and knowledge (or science or inquiry) as in competition with one another. Skepticism about art's aspirations to teach us anything – or at least anything important – is deeply rooted in philosophy: Plato took it upon himself time and again to defend what he took to be true inquiry from the arts, and Arthur Danto (1986) has argued that Plato's project of debunking art's epistemic aspirations shaped subsequent philosophy. Even some artists line up with the skeptics. W. H. Auden, for example, lamented that “poetry makes nothing happen” and that his own political poetry of the thirties failed to “save a single Jew” (Carpenter 1981: 413). However, a moment's reflection is enough to make us rethink Plato's skepticism. It seems clear that we would know far less than we do without art. It seems first that we would know less about the world and ourselves – think of an educational regime without literature and painting. It also seems obvious that we would know less about art itself – who does not know *something* about movies and music for example? Finally, much great art would be less great were it truly severed from knowledge and inquiry – think of the portrait or the nineteenth-century novel. Such appeals to appearances do not, of course, refute Platonic skepticism. What we need is an epistemology of art – a theory of what we know about the world *through* art and what we know *about* art from art itself.

## KNOWING THROUGH ART

In the *Republic*, Plato argued that art is dangerous and should be banned from the ideal state, since it affords only the illusion of knowledge and stirs up baser passions. The idea that we can gain insight or understanding from

art is, Plato claims, a foolish myth. This skepticism partly grows from Plato's metaphysics, but the core argument can be separated from the metaphysics. Art is a product of the imagination. Looking at a painting or reading a novel engages us in a make-believe world, which the work's artistry prepares us to be moved by and respond to. But knowledge is contact with reality, not make-believe. So art cannot generate knowledge except by accident.

The first to answer Plato was Aristotle. Focusing on tragedy, Aristotle articulated in the *Poetics* what has come to be called 'cognitivism.' That is, art works can have cognitive value by affording us insight, knowledge, or understanding; and in the right conditions a work's cognitive value is part of its value as art. Cognitivism does not imply that cognitive value is necessary for artistic value. Rather, cognitive value counts towards artistic value.

Recently, philosophers have revisited the ancient debate between Plato and Aristotle in light of the best new work on art on one hand and knowledge on the other hand. Thus contemporary non-cognitivists mount a refined critique of cognitivism which poses at least four distinct, stepped challenges; and contemporary cognitivists have replied to all four challenges.

The Triviality Challenge: art cannot afford knowledge or at least knowledge worth having. It offers only trivial or banal truths (Stolnitz 1992).

The motivation for this challenge derives from Plato. How could a product of imagination, which functions to sustain games of make-believe, yield truth? After all, if make-believe worlds are imaginative creations, then they need not reflect the way the world actually is. The point of imagination is that it enables us to think beyond the confines of actuality. So it is a mistake to take what happens in make-believe as a window on reality. Jane Austen's characters are realistically portrayed, but we cannot infer from the way people are in Austen's fictions to the way people actually are.

Furthermore, consider what people often put forward as insights to be gleaned from fictions. Orwell's *1984* is said to convey the suppression of individuality that comes with totalitarianism, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is said to illuminate the misery of a loveless marriage, and Austen's *Emma* is said to show the dangers of self-deception. Yet none of this do we *learn* from art works. Maybe reading *Anna Karenina* gets me to see that a loveless marriage is a terrible thing because I'd never thought about it before. Even so, the 'insight' remains commonplace and trivial.

The challenge can be put as a dilemma. Either we already believe the messages art works convey or we do not. If we do, art does not teach us anything. If we do not, then art does not afford knowledge since nothing ties make-believe to the truth about the actual world.

Several replies are available to the cognitivist. One is that the challenge applies only to fictions, but not all art works are fictions. Another argues

that the kind of knowledge art affords is non-propositional – practical know-how, phenomenal knowledge, or access to ways of understanding the world that cannot be expressed in propositional terms (Wilson 1983; Nussbaum 1990; Graham 2000: 44–64). A third proposes that, whether or not art works afford knowledge, they cultivate cognitive virtues and thereby have cognitive value (Kieran 2004: 138–47; Lopes 2005: ch. 4). The most direct strategy is to show that art can indeed afford propositional knowledge (Kieran 1996, 2004: ch. 3; Gaut 2003: 442–4, forthcoming: ch. 7).

The Warrant Challenge: even if art affords significant true belief, it does not warrant belief, and knowledge requires warrant. Perhaps we can and do acquire true beliefs from art. By reading Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes, I may come to believe all sorts of truths about London – that Baker Street is near Great Portland Street, for example. Nonetheless, I may also acquire false beliefs, for example that there was a house at 221b Baker Street. The trouble is that there is no way of telling *from a fiction* which beliefs I glean from it are true and which are false. If I want to know whether Baker Street is near Great Portland Street, I must look outside the fiction – say, at a map. If I want to find out whether there was a house at 221b Baker Street, I should consult the relevant historical sources (Stolnitz 1992: 196). This is no surprise: whatever the purposes of art works are, truth telling is not one of them (Lamarque and Olsen 1994). So art works do not have the right kind of resources to warrant (or justify) a belief.

A promising line of response to this challenge starts with the premise that in many cases the ultimate test of knowledge is experience. My map of London might be incorrect, but I trust it because I have evidence that it was made by someone who checked the locations of Baker Street and Great Portland Street. The same goes for fictions. Zola and Dickens wrote psychological realist novels, were social reformers, and sought to expose and campaign against social injustice partly through their novels. So I have reason to trust the characterization of French miners in *Germinal* or the factories of the English Industrial Revolution in *Hard Times* (Gaut 2003).

The Uniqueness Challenge: even if art works warrant important true beliefs, they do not convey knowledge in any distinctive manner (Stolnitz 1992). Areas of inquiry such as philosophy or science are characterized by their objects of study and the methods they prescribe for learning about those objects. To learn about the physical world, perform experiments, analyze the data, and consider it in relation to theoretical assumptions about physical entities and to preferred physical theories. To deepen philosophical understanding, attend to what makes a question a philosophical one, obey empirical side-constraints, outline the putative justificatory relations

between claims, look for suppressed premises, seek reflective equilibrium between intuitions and theoretical models, or search for inferences to the best explanation. By contrast, art delimits no distinctive area of enquiry and no distinctive methods of inquiry.

Cognitivists might dispute this clean characterization of distinctive areas and methods of enquiry. They might also claim that there is an object and method of inquiry particular to art – namely art itself. Many works employ distinctively artistic methods to reflect on the nature, methods, and materials of art itself. A more direct response denies that the uniqueness challenge needs to be met. Perhaps art has no distinctive object of inquiry but art works deploy distinctively artistic methods in getting us to see a whole range of truths or crystallize our understanding in many different areas. *To Kill a Mocking Bird* conveys what is wrong with racism and so might a philosophy article, *Enduring Love* deepens our sense of the evolutionary and cultural complexities of love just as much as biological science, Robert Graves's *I Claudius* brings to life the trials and tribulations of Rome's transition from Republic to Empire as much as a decent history book. What is distinctive of art is not the object but the methods of inquiry. For example, artistic devices get us to care about characters or see things in a new light. And maybe these methods are not wholly unique to art, though art works make particularly good use of them to promote understanding (Kieran 1996, 2004; Gaut 2003, forthcoming).

The Relevance Challenge: even if the Uniqueness Challenge can be addressed, a work's affording knowledge is no part of its artistic value. After all, we highly value works which make incompatible claims. Sartre's *Road to Freedom* trilogy embodies a conception of radical human freedom diametrically opposed to that manifest in Kafka's *Trial*, but we value both authors' works highly. It follows that their truth is irrelevant to their value as art (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Lamarque 2006). Consider a novel like David Peace's *GB84*, which dramatizes the bloody, violent miners' strike that took place in Thatcher's Britain in 1984 and that was to decide the fate of the country for a decade or more. Key figures in the strike are faithfully represented, as is its trajectory, but they interact with various fictional ones. Now, the novel might have contained a lot more historical information than it does. We would then learn more about the strike. But this additional learning might not add to the novel's value as literature. If learning about the miners' strike were relevant to the value of the novel as art then it should follow that the more I learn the greater the novel. The point is not that we cannot learn from art works; it is rather that the learning is irrelevant to artistic value.

The cognitivist must reply by stating when the cognitive content of a work is relevant to its artistic value. Adding facts to *GB84* is irrelevant to its value as a novel when the new facts are in some sense extraneous to what it is doing artistically. Yet some historical facts are relevant because they capture the darkest days of Thatcherism: the sense of paranoia endemic on all sides, the idealistic incompetence of the miners' leaders, and the Orwellian practices of a state set on obliterating the union. One way forward explores how artistic devices fold the cognitive content of a work into our experience of it as art (Beardsmore 1973; Kieran 1996, 2004; Gaut 2003, forthcoming). Thus works engage our imagination; so perhaps when facts are imagined, they are relevant to artistic value. Likewise, works guide our affective responses; so perhaps facts are relevant when they engage affective responses (Gaut 1998, forthcoming). Of course, showing a link to imagination or affect is not enough to answer the Relevance Challenge. The cognitivist must show that imagination or affect are engaged in *artistically* relevant ways. She must say when imaginative or affective responses are internal to the artistic value of a work.

Cognitivists must address each of these four challenges, either by meeting them or by showing why they are misplaced. The papers in part I attempt to develop the resources available to cognitivists.

Dustin Stokes's "Art and Modal Knowledge" takes on the claim that art cannot provide us with non-trivial propositional knowledge. He argues that our experiences of art works can give rise to reliably formed beliefs about modal truths (truths about possibilities). The argument requires a substantial discussion of different types of modality and the prospects for modal knowledge *per se*. The upshot of this discussion is that coherent and consistent imaginings non-accidentally track modal truths. When we form beliefs on the basis of such imaginings, they are justified. It does not follow that fictions reliably track modal truth, for fictions can represent metaphysically impossible states of affairs. The claim is a weaker one. Fictions suggest candidate possibilities for our consideration. By stepping back from the fiction and reflecting on its consistency and coherence, we can find out if what is fictional is also possible. The argument is a direct response to the Triviality Challenge, for modal knowledge is anything but trivial – we use it in scientific, philosophical, and ordinary reasoning. There is good reason to think that fiction, because it makes full use of imagination, is especially good at prompting modal knowledge.

Stacie Friend's "Narrating the Truth (More or Less)" focuses on how works can enable us to learn about history in ways that are tied to their artistic value. Through a detailed consideration of Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*, Friend disputes non-cognitivist claims that the standard aim of fiction

conflicts with acquiring factual knowledge, that acquiring factual knowledge is a trivial achievement, and that information transmission is irrelevant to the value of literary works. Friend starts by drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology to outline a two-stage model of learning from a text. The first stage is that of comprehension by constructing a situation model of the text's content. Here a reader's comprehension is indicated by their making inferences to integrate prior knowledge with incoming information. At the second stage, readers integrate new information in the situation model with long-term belief structures (which enables access and application across contexts). Here integration and organization are crucial. Readers who are more active at the first stage are better at the second. Friend shows that *Lincoln* possesses many features which depend on narrative devices and which prompt the kind of inferences that result in the integration of new information with other beliefs in long-term memory. Hence an analysis of the narrative devices Vidal employs, given recent work in cognitive psychology, shows how the resources of artistic mediation enhance our ability to learn and retain factual information.

In "Fiction and Psychological Insight," Kathleen Stock argues, against philosophers as diverse as Stolnitz and Carroll, that some psychological depictions in fiction reveal themselves as possibilities of human experience. Readers of these fictions may thus acquire new psychological knowledge, independent of prior or subsequent evidence. The first stage in the argument details how fictions can render the actions of characters intelligible. There is a weak sense of intelligibility that amounts to merely showing how a character's mental state or action fits a background of ends. Stock argues that something stronger is possible: fictions can also make intelligible a character's background of ends. To do this, they need only show how an end might count as desirable. Stock recognizes that one might deny that fictions are sources of psychological knowledge because we cannot generalize from the intelligibility of fictional characters to psychological principles that fit real people. However, she argues that this objection mistakenly assumes that psychological knowledge is acquired from fiction inductively – that we generalize from make-believe to reality. On the contrary, just seeing the actions of fictional characters as intelligible constitutes psychological knowledge.

Derek Matravers, in "Pictures, Knowledge and Power," takes a critical look at a cognitivist assumption that underlies the practice of many art historians. As T. J. Clark articulates the assumption, paintings provide historical evidence that reliably informs us about the ideology of the paintings' viewers. Clark adds that accessing the evidence requires a semiological



framework only available to the specialist historian. Matravers argues that Clark's assumption about knowledge of ideology can be preserved while dropping the need to apply a semiological framework. Through a detailed philosophical reconstruction of Clark's writings on Manet's *Olympia*, Matravers argues that we learn from the painting by applying visual concepts to what is visually presented. Furthermore, some concepts which we use to structure our perceptions apply only to paintings. Thus we do not 'read' *Olympia* as a nude, but rather the idea of 'the nude' is made visible to us by painting – and only by painting. *Olympia* is therefore a distinctively pictorial source of knowledge about ideology. But not every ideological concept can be visually presented by a painting. Matravers is skeptical of Clark's claim that paintings provide evidence of ideologies of 'modernity' and 'class.' These concepts do not configure our visual experiences of paintings.

Peter Goldie's paper, "Charley's World: Narratives of Aesthetic Experience," argues that direct acquaintance with an art work can lead both to appreciating the work as art and to insight into the world. Goldie focuses on an episode in Somerset Maugham's *Christmas Holiday* which illustrates how we can 'come to see' aesthetic properties of a work with the help of a suitably informed critic. The episode suggests an account of how an art work's aesthetic properties and value can be accessed through perceptual experience, and Goldie extends the account to explain appreciation through imagined experiences. The reader of *Christmas Holiday* can imagine projecting himself into Charley's situation, and thus experiencing a work that Charley is described as seeing. Imaginings like this can change our understanding and also our aesthetic dispositions. Goldie's view challenges the idea that first-hand experience of an art work is required for aesthetic appreciation, but it accommodates the weaker idea that appreciation requires some connection to experience. It is just that the connection is sometimes less direct than is commonly supposed.

Keith Lehrer's paper, "Knowing Content in the Visual Arts," concerns how we know the content of a work of visual art. Lehrer presents several paradoxes, such as how a work's content can both be known to an observer and recognized repeatedly if its content is ultimately ineffable. Dissolving the paradoxes leads to the view that to know what a work of visual art is like is to see it as exemplarizing sensory experience. Exemplarization is related to Goodman's notion of exemplification, but Lehrer contrasts his account with Goodman's semantic theory of representation. He also extends his account to explain knowledge of the emotional content of art works and to explain how knowledge of what a visual work of art is like figures in discursive, propositional knowledge about the work of art. Lehrer closes

with the suggestion that the role of experience in concept formation sheds light on Arnold Isenberg's (1949) account of critical communication as perception – a theme of several papers in part II of the collection.

## KNOWING ABOUT ART

Whatever the prospects for gaining knowledge through art of such matters as human psychology, the good life, or counterfactual possibility, one might also wonder about the prospects for knowing about art works themselves. What can we know about art? How do we know it?

Setting aside skepticism about the possibility of knowing anything at all, we obviously know a lot about art works. I know that *Mona Lisa* resides in Paris, that she is painted in oil on poplar panel, and that she is somewhat disfigured by craquelure. Moreover, I know these things in just the way I know that it snowed on Grouse Mountain today, that glycol lowers the freezing point of water, and that Wayne Gretsky is a fine stick-handler. In all of these cases, I have a belief, the belief is true, and it is warranted by evidence. It is important to remember that warrant can flow from different sources. One important source is the senses: I have seen *Mona Lisa*'s craquelure and Gretsky's stick-handling. Another is the testimony of others: I cannot tell just by looking that the *Mona Lisa* is painted on poplar, but my belief is warranted because reliable sources assure me that it is (just as they warrant my belief that glycol freezes at a lower temperature than water). To explain many things I know about the *Mona Lisa*, I can get my epistemology off-the-rack. The same standards apply to what I know about the *Mona Lisa*'s poplar panel as apply to what I know about hockey and chemistry.

Here is something else I know about *Mona Lisa* that differs in kind from the cases mentioned above: I know that the painting depicts a woman. Likewise, I know that Somerset Maugham's *Christmas Holiday* tells a story about how Charley is changed by getting to know Lydia and a painting by Chardin. In one case my knowledge comes from perception, whereas it comes from language in the other case; and that is an important difference (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Lopes 2005). Even so, the cases belong to a kind: they are knowledge of the meaning of a work – they are interpretations. We also know the meaning of non-artistic representations – ordinary conversations, for example. However, most philosophers agree that, when it comes to art works, interpretation should take into account such matters as the work's genre, its art-historical context, and its value on different possible interpretations. Only a specially tailored epistemology explains

what goes into knowing the meaning of an art work, and a great deal of effort has gone into constructing theories of pictorial and narrative interpretation (e.g. Iseminger 1992; Lopes 1996; Hopkins 1998; Stecker 2003).

The essays in part II concern a third kind of knowledge about art: critical judgment ('judgment' for short). This refers not only to the judgments of professional critics. As Robertson Davies notes,

it is particularly displeasing to hear professional critics use the term 'layman' to describe people who are amateurs and patrons of those arts with which they are themselves professionally concerned. The fact that the critic gets money for knowing something, and giving public expression to his opinion, does not entitle him to consider the amateur, who may be as well informed and sensitive as himself, an outsider (1990).

Indeed, judgment belongs to anyone who pays attention to or argues about art. It is one product of looking at, listening to, or reading works of art; and it is the currency we use to exchange opinions about art – it is the currency of critical reasoning (which is, again, not a monopoly held by professionals).

That hardly distinguishes judgment from other knowledge about art, such as interpretive knowledge. We should add that only judgments attribute aesthetic properties. Frank Sibley famously listed some paradigms: "unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic" (2001*b*: 1). For Sibley, aesthetic properties are perceptual, they supervene on non-aesthetic properties, and there are no rules to pick them out – taste is needed. Furthermore, Sibley's list divides between formal properties (like 'unified') and emotive ones (like 'moving'), and there is some dispute about whether contextual properties (like 'original,' 'influential,' and 'passé') or cognitive ones (like 'profound,' 'insightful,' and 'false') should be included. Philosophers disagree about Sibley's conception of aesthetic properties and the wisdom of extending his list of paradigm aesthetic properties to include contextual and cognitive ones (e.g. Walton 1970; Zangwill 2001).

They also disagree about whether judgments always attribute *aesthetic value properties*. An extreme position is that judgments only attribute descriptively thin value properties. Thus Kant (1793/2000) took 'judgments of taste' to attribute only beauty or ugliness. A less extreme position takes judgments to attribute value properties which vary in descriptive thickness. On this view, all the properties on Sibley's list, extended or not, are merits or demerits when attributed in judgments. To judge a painting delicate is to attribute to it a merit or a flaw. The most moderate position allows some judgments to be evaluative and some to be non-evaluative. 'Delicacy'

is evaluative in some judgments and value-neutral in others. (Perhaps the only essentially evaluative critical properties are descriptively thin ones like ‘beauty.’)

None of these disagreements are epistemic; but if some beliefs are judgments which figure as elements in critical reasoning, a cluster of interconnected epistemic issues arises. It is a datum for many philosophers (following Isenberg 1949) that critical reasoning is somehow perceptual. So one issue is the relationship between judgment and perception. Another datum is that critical reasoning involves norms, and so a second issue is whether the norms figure in critical reasoning as principles. A third issue is whether it is right to think of judgment as an element in reasoning in the first place.

Judgments are elements in reasoning only if they are genuine. A genuine judgment tracks reality; it is compelled by evidence. Given suitable evidence, it leaves the judge no room for discretion. A handy model is Crispin Wright’s account of genuine assertions, which are:

associated with conditions of such a kind that one who is sincerely unwilling to assent to such a statement when, by ordinary criteria, those conditions obtain, can make himself intelligible to us only by betraying a misunderstanding or some sort of misapprehension, or by professing some sort of skeptical attitude (Wright 1980: 463; see also Pettit 1983: 20–3).

So if a work is genuinely judged delicate then your dissent is unintelligible if you insist that you understand the work, that you know what delicacy is, and that you are not in the grip of some skeptical hypothesis (you are not, for instance, a brain in a vat). The intelligibility of your dissent from a genuine judgment leaves room for misunderstanding. It even leaves room for skepticism. It does not leave room for discretion on your part.

One might think that if there is ever room for discretion, it is to be found in criticism. Beauty, we say, is in the eye of the beholder. We mean her heart, of course. Or rather, we mean that beauty depends on the beholder’s response. Part of the point of going to an art gallery or a concert with friends is that each member of the company responds differently. Some of the most useful criticism is highly personal and reveals as much about the critic as it reveals about the work. If this is right and art critical judgments depend upon responses that are discretionary, then judgments are not genuine. No wonder there is no point in disputing matters of taste.

At the same time, however, we *do* dispute meaningfully in matters of taste in art. Art would not be even half of what it is for us were it to put us

beyond disagreement. It is no injustice to the taste of espresso to deny its power to spark reasoned debate. We are quite happy for some to like and others to dislike espresso, and recognizing that others' preferences are not my preferences in no way undermines my opting for espresso every time. Here debate is pointless. By contrast, it is an injustice to Manet's *Olympia* to deny its power to spark reasoned debate. In saying that *Olympia* is a good work of art I make a claim upon the judgment of others – namely, to agree with me – and I incur an obligation to give others my reasons. I also recognize that I might be wrong in my judgment. I find Cy Twombly's oversized diminutives pathetically indulgent, but my assurance depends on my seeing that I might be wrong. It depends, in particular, on seeing that I might be missing something that someone more expert can point out to me and that will lead me to retract my judgment. As a matter of fact, we do revise our judgments of art works – what we once thought subtle, elegant, or moving is now revealed to be leaden, gauche, and stilted.

So then, are judgments genuine? We are pulled in opposite directions, and we are right to seek a compromise. Tradition offers one (e.g. Hume 1757/1987; Kant 1793/2000). Some properties are response-dependent – for example, colors, if they are dispositions to cause certain experiences. Likewise the properties attributed in judgments, for they depend on aesthetic responses. Nevertheless, if responses are governed by norms, then there is a point to disputing attributions of response-dependent properties. According to tradition, the norm is the response of an unbiased judge. So judgments are both response-dependent and genuine, given a refined account of genuine judgment: if a work is genuinely judged delicate then your dissent is unintelligible if you insist that you understand the work, that you understand delicacy, that you are not in the grip of some skeptical hypothesis, and that you admit no bias in your response to the work.

Jesse Prinz, in "Really Bad Taste," rejects tradition's compromise, arguing that judgments are thoroughly biased and moreover that bias makes a positive contribution to criticism. He therefore proposes a different compromise, which he calls pluralistic sentimentalism. That is, there are many norms governing aesthetic responses (that is the pluralism) and aesthetic responses are emotions (that is the sentimentalism). Each norm represents a bias when viewed from an external perspective but also sets a standard for those who uphold the norm. This suggests another refinement to genuine judgment. If a work is genuinely judged delicate then your dissent is unintelligible if you insist that you understand the work, that you understand delicacy, that you are not in the grip of some skeptical hypothesis, and that you uphold the norm on which the work is judged delicate. Judgment is genuine although biased and response-dependent. It follows that judgments

are warranted by a special kind of knowledge – knowledge of what causes appreciation in people who uphold the relevant norms. Mistakes here trigger errors in judgment.

In “Solving the Problem of Aesthetic Testimony,” Aaron Meskin also addresses the genuineness of judgment, and connects that issue to the relationship between judgment and perception.

Skeptics aside, most agree that testimony warrants empirical belief. The testimony of scientific experts warrants my belief that whales are mammals and the testimony of my son warrants my belief that his dog was fed today. However, many claim that testimony cannot warrant judgment. According to Richard Wollheim’s ‘acquaintance principle,’ judgments are warranted only by first-hand, perceptual experience of works (Wollheim 1980: 233). Some take this asymmetry to show that judgment is not genuine – to vindicate, what Meskin calls ‘anti-realism.’ The idea is that anti-realism explains the asymmetry by analyzing judgment as requiring a response (e.g. an emotion) that is available only upon first-hand acquaintance and not via testimony. Meskin responds that some anti-realist theories, including Mackie-style error theory and Ayer-style expressivism, actually obliterate and thus cannot explain the asymmetry. He also argues that Alan Gibbard’s (1990) ‘norm-expressivism,’ which is kin to Prinz’s pluralistic sentimentalism, also fails to explain the asymmetry. Judgment, once subject to norms, takes warrant from testimony. It is norms that allow us to defer to others.

To solve the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, Meskin conjoins three claims. Judgment is highly unreliable except in certain circumstances. And we know this. Finally, we more often know when we are in such circumstances than when others are. As a result, we trust ourselves, as critics, more readily than we trust others.

If Meskin is right, Wollheim’s acquaintance principle goes too far in locating judgment’s warrant in first-hand experience alone. Still, perceptual experience does seem to play some special role in judgment. In his classic 1949 essay on “Critical Communication,” Arnold Isenberg voiced a view that has since been widely adopted. Isenberg proposed that criticism functions to guide perception, to lead a work’s audience to see it in a certain way. Criticism fails if it persuades you, for example, that Manet’s *Olympia* is aggressive and yet you cannot see it as aggressive.

The insight that criticism is a guide to perception seems to stand in some tension with the insight that criticism is a rational activity. In “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception,” Robert Hopkins aims to reconcile the insights. He begins by pinpointing the incompatibility between perception and reasoning. Perception is receptive to and puts us in contact with the world. Thus it is entirely self-supporting. Seeing *Olympia*’s aggression

is enough to know that the painting is aggressive. At the same time, in reasoning, premises are in principle sufficient to adopt the conclusion. Nothing more is needed to establish 'q' than 'if p then q' plus 'p.' So perception leaves no place for reasoning and reasoning leaves no place for the receptivity of perception.

These features of perception and reasoning indicate what reconciliation requires. It must be that some reasons are ineffective without the receptivity of perception and some perceptions are composed of reasons as elements. Hopkins proposes that perception is sometimes a process composed of subsidiary perceptions structured as reasons. Critical reasoning, in particular, is a perceptual process made up of subsidiary perceptions structured like reasons.

James Shelley, in "Critical Compatibilism," also takes up the question of what it is for a judgment to serve as a reason in criticism. Isenberg (1949) formulated a view that has since come to be called 'particularism' (and that has spread to other areas of philosophy, notably ethics). According to particularism, in criticism there is no appeal to general principles. Reasoning like '*Olympia* is good because it is aggressive' does not imply a norm linking aggressiveness to goodness. Particularism is usually set against generalism. Sibley, a generalist, held that there are general reasons in criticism, since reasons in criticism "have a consistency about them" (2001c: 104).

As we have seen, Isenberg views criticism as guiding perception and he seems to have thought that view brings particularism along with it. In fact, the perceptual model of criticism is consistent with both particularism and generalism. It is consistent with generalism provided that the general reasons that figure in criticism are perceptual.

Shelley argues that, appearances aside, particularism as defined by Isenberg and generalism as defined by Sibley are compatible. In criticism, no appeal is made to general *principles* but there are general *reasons*. This implies only that general reasons are not general principles – that a reason can "have a consistency about it" without being a principle. A principle has a consistency about it because it applies in all relevantly similar cases. A reason need not have the same kind of consistency about it. Instead, it need only be open to refinement in response to what Shelley calls a consistency challenge. A consistency challenge is, Shelley suggests, part of the logic of criticism.

The epistemology of judgment cannot be taken 'off the rack.' Judgments are thought to be response-dependent in a way that diminishes the quality of testimonial warrant for judgment and even challenges the assumption that they are elements in critical reasoning. If they are elements in critical reasoning, then they may not apply consistently across cases, as do other

kinds of reasons. Finally, critical reasoning might implicate perception in a way that provokes a new look at deep assumptions about perception and reasoning.

Art engages us at every level – emotionally, to be sure, but also as moral agents and as members of the inquiring species. This fact is best viewed as an opportunity for research. Recognizing that art is a conduit to knowledge about ourselves and our world is crucial to understanding art and also to understanding knowledge. Recognizing that critical judgment has special features makes it a good case study in the epistemology of value (which also includes moral epistemology). The biggest obstacles to accepting the epistemic aspirations of art is a narrow view of art and a narrow view of knowledge (both were obstacles for Plato). Put another way, by knowing more about knowing art, we have a chance to deepen our theories of art and knowledge.

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## Chapter 1

# KNOWING CONTENT IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Keith Lehrer

My objective is to explain how we know what a painting, or any work of visual art, is like. This knowledge of what the work of art is like is knowledge of the content of the work of art. I use the concept of content in a way similar to the use of the concept of meaning, and construe content as having a functional role, though not merely a functional role, in the mentality of the viewer. When we know what the work of art is like, we know its content in a special way, by incorporating the experience of the work of art into a state of understanding and knowledge. We cannot know the content of the work of art without experiencing the work, because the experience is used to represent the content of the work and is part of the content. The representation of the content incorporates the experience, including the phenomenology of the work of art, into the representational understanding of its content. My project is to explain how we can know the content of the work of art.

## REPRESENTATION BY EXEMPLARIZATION

My explanation is that the experience of the work of art results in representation of what the work of art is like in a way that uses the experience of the work of art as an exemplar to stand for a class of experiences of which it is a member. This process I have called 'exemplarization' (Lehrer, 1997). Exemplarization yields a representation of content in terms of an experienced particular that stands for other particulars. Exemplarization involves generalization of a particular. The notion of exemplarization stems from the empiricist tradition, most closely from Hume (1739–40/2000) and Reid (1785/2002).

Exemplarization, this special form of representation yielding knowledge of what the work of art is like, explains some of the most puzzling features of representation of a work of art. A linguistic description of the content of a work, though providing useful information for many purposes, seems to leave out something essential to what a work of art is like. This leads philosophers to say that the content of a work of art, even a representational painting, is ultimately ineffable. There is a point to speaking about the ineffability of the content of a painting, but it leads to paradox when one adds that the ineffable content can be known to an observer and appreciated many times over. How can the content be known and recognized repeatedly if it is ineffable?

## THE PARTICULARITY OF CONTENT

A related issue concerns the particularity of the content. There are many paintings of Olympia, and someone may observe that the Titian painting of Olympia is a member of the class of Olympia paintings. But one is also inclined to say that to know what the Titian painting is like is not just to know that it is an Olympia painting. One must know what the particular content of the painting is like if one is to appreciate it aesthetically or even to know exactly what it is like. Knowing what this painting is like, in the full particularity of experiencing it, is what is required for aesthetic appreciation. This appreciation rests on a special, particularized knowledge of what this Olympia painting is like. Moreover, the particularity of the content is not captured by distinguishing between digital and analogue representations (as Goodman, 1968, proposed). Digital and analogue representations, however detailed they may be, still fail to explain the particularity of the content of the work of art. The distinction between digital and analogue representation can mark the distinction between a representation of a species and that of an *infima* species, but an *infima* species, even if it has only one member, is still different from that one member. The member is a particular, and the species is general no matter how determinate it might be. If the content is particular, then knowledge of what the content is like must also be knowledge of a particular.

Knowledge of the particular content must involve a representation that gives the particular a semantic role in the representation of the content. This observation, however natural and plausible, also leads to a paradox or, at least, a puzzle. After all, the content of the painting is something that can be experienced repeatedly. The repetition involves different particular experiences, however similar and even indistinguishable the experiences

might be from one another. The common content of the different particular experiences seems to require that the representation of the content, as well as the content represented, be both particular and general at the same time. But how can the representation and the content itself be both particular and general? How can our knowledge of the content be both knowledge of what something is like as a particular and, at the same time, knowledge of something common to a class of particulars?

## **REPRESENTATION AND CONTENT IN ART**

Another problem concerns art and representation. Suppose the content of a work of art is similar to the content of the perception of identifiable objects. This might even enable one to recognize some perceived object from the content of the painting (Lopes 1996). As a result, we might hope to characterize or explain the character of the content in terms of its relationship to the perceived object. However, the content of a painting may be expressionistic and not enable one to identify any perceived object. The artist may be interested in reconfiguring and distorting his model, for example, to create new content. Moreover, a painting that bears a likeness to some perceived object is not necessarily about that object, merely because it bears such a likeness. A painting of Olympia is, one would expect, about a goddess and not about a hired model, though the goddess in the painting may have a close likeness to the model. The intention of the artist may be to reconfigure the model to represent Olympia, and the likeness may be incidental to the intended content of the painting. On the other hand, the figure in the painting may fail to bear a likeness to a person intended to be the content of the painting, and yet it may represent that person successfully without attaining that likeness. Madame Pompadour thought that Boucher was not good at capturing her likeness, but she approved of the content of his paintings of her. Boucher represented her as a woman having the position and role she sought and obtained. We may think of what Madame Pompadour was like from Boucher's paintings. Perhaps her contemporaries did as well. They may have seen her as the content of the paintings, and that may have been her wish.

However, there are paintings, many of them these days, which are abstract or minimal. It is natural, though incorrect, to think of such works as lacking content. Some minimalists have sought to produce contentless paintings. They mostly fail. The reason is that the observer naturally finds content because he or she manufactures it. We look at a painting and wonder what it is about. The first time one observes a Mondrian, for example, one

might just wonder what is about. One may soon come to think of it as representing spatial relations. Even if our reflections do not connect it with some previously understood content, we may find a content in the painting that enables us to identify it again and to identify what it is like in a way that would enable us to recognize other Mondrians. We now know what a Mondrian is like.

Minimal art may intentionally challenge the doctrine of content. We might see a large homogenous painting that does not represent any object at all. But we may nonetheless represent its content. It may be a representation of nothingness, of the void, or of color in the void, or of emotion and feeling in color. We seek meaning in experience, including the experience of art, and, seeking meaning, we find it by creating it. A painting created by an artist seeking to present the possibility of art without content will probably fail to present a work without content to most observers. The observers searching to find the content of the work may, if they find nothing, conceive the content of work to be a work without content. What it represents to them is a work without content, and, paradoxically, it will have that content for them, the content of contentlessness.

## EXEMPLARIZATION EXPLAINED

I shall now provide a more detailed account of the process of exemplarization by means of which we obtain a representation of what a painting is like. Consider, by analogy, a person who has never previously experienced color and now experiences color for the first time. One example, a fictitious one due to Frank Jackson (1982), deals with the scientist Mary, who has a complete understanding of the science of color but has been confined to a black and white room. Or if you prefer, consider someone who has been born colorblind, has always seen the world in black and white, but has all the knowledge of color that it is possible to obtain from the study of science. Call him 'Henry.' Now both Mary and Henry know a great deal about color and about what properties colored things have. But both of them lack a certain kind of knowledge about what colors are like, what the color red is like, for example. This is knowledge which those of us who have seen colors possess.

Imagine, now, that Mary or Henry suddenly experiences color, perhaps the color red, as we would describe it. We would not expect Mary or Henry to immediately connect the experience of red with their scientific knowledge about the color red. The antecedent knowledge they have about the color must be connected with their sensory experience of the color through

learning, association, and inference. Nevertheless, there is something that they do know – something about what red is like, once they have experienced it. First of all, it catches their attention. They notice the particular novel experience. The particular experience becomes the basis of representation as the result of generalization from it. The exemplar of red represents red for them in the way that hearing a new song for the first time represents the song for one (Goodman 1968). Representation requires generalization. The exemplar, whether of sound or color, represents a class of instances picked out by generalization of the exemplar. This process is exemplarization.

This claim concerning representation by exemplarization rests on an ability that I conjecture is innate. The innateness of it may help to explain how we obtain knowledge of what colors are like from the sensory experience of them by explaining why we generalize in the way that we do. We are constructed in such a way that we generalize from sensory experiences in a specific way without tutelage. This sort of generalization enables us to re-identify what we experience and recognize repeated instances of the sensory experience. Exemplarization involving generalization yields a general concept based on a particular experience which is an exemplar.

## **EXEMPLARIZATION AS KNOWLEDGE**

Why do we speak of representation resulting from exemplarization as knowledge? We have many representations that apply to themselves, the word ‘word,’ for example, whose self-application should not be confused with exemplarization. Representations that apply to themselves do not ensure knowledge. They may be applied without the process yielding knowledge. Words that apply to themselves may be applied to themselves in a way that falls short of knowledge in some instances because, though the application may be correct, there is nothing about the process of applying the term that connects it with truth, that is, with correct application. A person who applies a word, even the word ‘word’ to something, may get it wrong because she mistakes something to which the word applies for something to which it fails to apply. The advantage of exemplarization for obtaining truth or the correct application of the exemplar in the process of exemplarization is the functional character of the process itself. The exemplar is used to identify a class of instances which, by the nature of the process, applies to itself. The exemplar is used to pick out instances by generalizing to form a general conception that includes itself as an exemplarized instance. So the general conception resulting from exemplarization is one that applies to the exemplar as a result of the way in which the exemplar functions

in exemplarization. This distinguishes the use of the sensory experience of red in our examples from the use of the word 'word.' We do not use the word 'word' to identify words in the way in which Mary and Henry use their experience to identify sensory experiences in exemplarization. Thus, one reason for speaking of knowledge of what sensory experiences are like as *knowledge* is that the representational process of exemplarization yields a general conception which is correctly applied to the exemplar as a result of the process of exemplarization itself. The exemplar is part of the functional role of the general conception. It is at the same time a parcel of data used to identify further instances. The exemplar is part and parcel of the representation in a way that ensures truth. It is natural to speak of a truth-ensuring process of representation as knowledge of an immediate though primitive sort.

### **PRIMITIVE KNOWLEDGE AND THE EXEMPLARIZED SIGN**

This kind of knowledge may remain primitive until the representation is conceptually enhanced by being connected to a semantic network. I have distinguished primitive knowledge that may give us a disconnected, isolated truth from discursive knowledge that enables us to use what we know in reasoning and justification (Lehrer 2000). Mary and Henry may initially fail to represent red in a way that enables them to use the representation they obtain by exemplarization in reasoning and justification. The functional role of their general conception may at first be solely denotative and lack any connection with other conceptions. Remember that they may have completely failed in their first awareness of seeing red to connect their experience of the exemplar with anything they understand about colors or objects. The concept, though it would enable them to recognize other instances of red, is conceptually unconnected with other objects or properties. The knowledge contains a primitive truth that may later prove useful to them even though it initially fails to provide a useful premise for reasoning. As a result, the knowledge obtained is not what I have called *discursive knowledge*, knowledge which is essentially connected with justification.

The point can be clarified by considering the sensory experiences that Mary or Henry have when a red light flashes with sufficient intensity that all they experience is a homogeneous and undifferentiated field of red. To put it another way, they experience a visual sensation of red filling their visual fields. When they have such an experience, they might not initially connect the experience with any quality of any object. Indeed, they may initially fail

to connect this sensation with any object or any property of which they have antecedent knowledge. They experience red, however, and they have a kind of knowledge of what that is like by exemplarization of the experience. The particular experience acquires a functional role because it is used by Mary and Henry to identify what we would call *red* experiences. As a result, the particular experience acquires the functional role of a primitive sign.

A problem arises from our attempt to characterize the primitive sign based on the experience of Mary or Henry in terms of an equivalent sign in a natural language, the word 'red' in English, for example. That English word is part of a semantic network including a variety of semantic connections – minimally, it describes a quality of objects and that it is a specific color distinguishable from other colors (green, for example). The initial wholly denotative general conception arising from the exemplarization of the experience of Mary or Henry is, therefore, not equivalent to the general conception associated with the word 'red' in English. Suppose that Mary has a general conception of the quality red, which she has obtained from her reading of the scientific literature before actually experiencing red, and suppose further that she associates this conception with 'red' in English. When she first experiences red, she may not immediately connect her experience with the general conception she associates with the word 'red.' Moreover, the general conception she forms upon her first experience of red by exemplarizing the experience to obtain a denotative conception will differ from the semantically more complicated general conception associated with the word.

How should we conceive of the connection between the exemplar which has a functional role in a denotative conception for identifying instances of the denotation, on the one hand, and the word 'red' associated with the semantically connected general conception, on the other? Once Mary connects the word with the exemplarized sign, which could happen soon after the experience is exemplarized, the general conception associated with her use of the word 'red' will be functionally altered. For now Mary will use the information obtained from exemplarizing her sensory experience of red in her application of the word 'red.' Since she now knows what red is like from her experience of red, she will now use that knowledge to apply the word 'red.' However, that does not mean that the denotation of the word and of the exemplarized sign is the same. The exemplarized experience has the functional role of identifying sensory states, while the word is applied to things that are red. Some things that are red do not give rise to sensory experiences because of circumstances (e.g. lack of light) that are known by the subject to obliterate the sensory experiences. Other things that are not red will give rise to sensory experiences indistinguishable from the exemplar

because of deceptive circumstances of illumination. One might try to put the point by saying that the exemplar originally functions as a sign like 'looks red' rather than 'is red,' but that could be misleading. The exemplarized experience is originally a sign that is innocent of the distinction between being red and looking red and is, therefore, semantically and conceptually simpler and more primitive.

The foregoing suggests the following question: is the exemplar part of the content of the representation or part of the way the content is represented? The answer is that it is part of the content, for the content incorporates the exemplar as part of what the content is like, and, at the same time, the process of representation gives the exemplar a special functional role. The exemplar is used as a sign in the process of representation to represent a content. What the content is like depends on what the exemplar is like. The exemplar is part and parcel of the content.

## **KNOWING THE CONTENT OF ART**

It is important at this point to relate the understanding of the exemplarized sign to our knowledge of art. We noted at the outset that the content of a painting incorporates the exemplarized particular into a conception of the content of the painting. The particular, the exemplar, is a sensory experience that plays a functional role in the conception of the content so that we know what the content of the painting is like. Take, for example, a picture of the House of Seven Gables. One needs to experience the painting in order to know what the content of the painting is like. Of course, one knows something about the content of the painting from the description, and, if the description were more complete, one might be able to distinguish the painting from other paintings, especially those with a different subject matter altogether. Yet without seeing the painting, there is something one would not know about what the painting is like and, therefore, about what the content of the painting is like. Observing the painting results in exemplarizing the sensory experience so that we know something new about what the content is like. We know something new about the content of the painting, about the House of Seven Gables in the painting, in the same way that Mary knows something new about the color red when she observes the color red and knows what it is like when she experiences red. The exemplarization of the sensory experience of the painting yields knowledge of what the painting is like by enhancing the conception of the painting we might obtain from a description of the painting, no matter how complete. The person who sees the painting adds a sensory conception of the content, obtained from



exemplarizing the particular, to the descriptive content of the painting and thereby obtains an enriched or enhanced conception of that content. In this case, the conception of a house is enhanced by a sensory concept to yield a new conception of the content of the painting, including knowledge of what it is like.

The foregoing remarks suggest that the enhancement of the conception of content by means of exemplarization is a simple addition of one kind of content to another. However, the enhancement that results from exemplarization may alter the functional aspects of the conception of the content in ways more complicated than the simple addition of a means of identifying the painting. One may realize, when one observes the painting that one has changed one's conception of the House of Seven Gables in negative as well as positive ways. The positive aspect is that the subject has a new way of identifying particulars, particular experiences of the painting, and so gains knowledge of how to identify the painting. But that is not all there is to the matter. While the exemplarization of the particular experience does enable us to identify further experiences of the painting, it does this by converting the exemplarized particular into a sign that represents particular experiences. Thus, the enhanced conception requires an accommodation of one sign, a word, to another sign, a sensory experience, and the accommodation may involve more complicated changes in the content or meaning of the word or descriptive expression.

Consider the person viewing the painting of the House of Seven Gables after reading about the house, first in Hawthorne, and then in a book about historic buildings. One might have a definite conception of the house and what it looks like as a result of imagining a house that fulfills the two descriptions. The imagined house based solely on descriptive discourse may have a functional role in the conception of the house. Now suppose the person views the painting and exemplarizes the sensory experience, thereby obtaining a sensory conception of the content of that painting. The sensory conception, that is, the exemplarized conception, may give the person a conception of the House of Seven Gables that conflicts with the descriptive content and, especially, with how the person imagined the house from the description. Moreover, the person may now alter the functional role of the descriptive conception enhanced by imagination to accommodate the sensory conception as a replacement for how the person imagined the house based on the description. Or, on the contrary, the person may refuse to alter the antecedent conception of the House of Seven Gables to accommodate the sensory content of the painting. Notice, moreover, that the same problem would arise with a photograph of the house. The person may be more inclined to accommodate the sensory experience resulting from

exemplarizing a photograph, but, since photographs of the house at different times and under different conditions may vary greatly, the same issue arises, namely, of what role, if any, to give to the sensory concept, in amending the descriptive conception. Indeed, the same problem arises from actually seeing the house itself and exemplarizing that sensory experience.

The point can be formulated in a way suggested by the excellent account that Lopes (1996) gives us of how representation is related to the ability to recognize the external object represented. A change in conception incorporating the exemplarized experience as a dominant component for identifying or recognizing the object represented in the painting may require rejection of preconceptions of what the sensory experience of the painting would be like. So the sensory conception resulting from exemplarization might require negative amendment of the antecedent conception in order to accommodate the functional role of the sensory experience. Lehrer and Lehrer (1995) propose a theory of meaning which takes the various factors influencing the meaning of words to be vectors that are mathematically aggregated to obtain meaning. A similar notion of content as the aggregation of innate, personal, and social influences could be developed to explain the process of generalization and accommodation in the use of exemplarization.

## MODIFYING CONTENT OF THE ACTUAL

The problem becomes more interesting when we ask how one might modify one's conception of the actual House of Seven Gables in Salem as a result of observing a painting of it – mine in Tucson, for example. For a person might change his or her conception of the House of Seven Gables as a result of seeing the painting in Tucson. Moreover, the person might, as a result of accommodating his or her conception to the exemplarized sensory experience of the painting, perceive the actual house in a different way, focusing attention on some features and ignoring others in the invariably selective process of perception. The painting might alter perceptual knowledge of the real house by focusing more attention on the tree standing next to it, for example. Thus, knowledge of what the content of the painting is like, when it results from exemplarization of sensory experience, may influence perceptual knowledge of what the actual house in Salem is like when one sees it. In this way, the content of the painting and what it is like may determine the content of seeing the house and what it is like. The worlds of art and perception may combine to provide a conception of a new world.

It is useful to compare this notion of our knowledge of what things are like by exemplarization to what has been said by others about art. Arnold

Isenberg in his justly famous article on critical communication (1949) suggests that the meaning of words used to describe works of art is filled in or completed by the sensory experience of the art object. Since he places emphasis on the role of the critic in calling attention to features of the work of art, he is sometimes interpreted as providing a non-cognitive theory of critical discourse. Whatever his original intention, however, his account is compatible with a cognitive account. The way the meaning or content of critical discourse is filled in by sensory experience, by observing the work of art, is explained by exemplarization. Since exemplarization yields a conception and a correct conception yields truth, there is a cognitive account of critical discourse that results naturally from the account of exemplarization. It is important to notice, however, that descriptive discourse, as well as metaphorical description used by the critic, can influence how a person observes the work of art. Consequently, the sensory experience exemplarized may be in part the result of how attention is directed to the art object by the critic. Once attention is so directed, however, the content of the discourse of the critic is enhanced by the exemplarized content. There is an interaction between discourse and exemplarized content that results in the amalgamation of discursive content and exemplarized content to yield new meaning, new content, and a new perception of the world.

## **EXEMPLARIZATION AND EXEMPLIFICATION**

It is most useful to compare this account of knowledge with one proposed by Goodman (1968), for Goodman insisted on the symbolic character of the arts. The notion of exemplarization is indebted to Goodman, though it is at the same time, and perhaps more deeply, indebted to Hume (1739–40/2000), Reid (1785/2002), and Sellars (1963). Goodman insisted on the importance of exemplification as a form of symbolic representation, and there are similarities between the notion of exemplarization and Goodman's notion of exemplification. Goodman's idea is that some individual exemplifying a property or a predicate (which is his nominalistic ways of talking about properties) is used to refer to the predicate which denotes not only the individual exemplified but other individuals as well. The similarity of this account to the account of exemplarization is that a particular or an individual plays a special role in the symbolic representation of a class of individuals of which it is a member. Moreover, the symbolic representation effected by the use of the exemplified individual is, according to Goodman, a source of knowledge as a result of the role it plays in representation.

My account of exemplarization is clearly similar to Goodman's, and I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to his work. There are differences,

however. Goodman, when he exchanges pleonastic formulation for what he regards as the philosophically more fundamental nominalistic discourse, connects the exemplarized particular with other particulars by means of reference to a predicate. The exemplified particular refers to a predicate that denotes a class of particulars that includes the particular used to effect the exemplification. The differences between his account and the account of exemplarization I have offered turn on the role of a predicate in Goodman's account. As Goodman (1968: 85–95) formulates the matter, exemplification is a form of representation dependent upon, and derived from, linguistic representation by predicates, even though Goodman insists on the difference between description and other forms of representation.

Perhaps the idea that exemplification is achieved by reference to a predicate should not be taken too seriously. However, it is clear that requiring reference to a predicate is a serious limitation imposed on the notion of exemplification. I contend that the kind of representation effected by exemplarization distinguishes it from linguistic representation by allowing us to use a sensory particular to represent a class of particulars in a way that is not constrained by linguistic representation and may indeed transcend it. Exemplarization bypasses linguistic representation, however much they may become functionally connected; it allows for a novel representation and reconfiguration of experience that cannot be affected by linguistic representation. Exemplification, which effects representation through reference to a predicate, is limited to conventional representation within a language, however those conventions may be extended by metaphorical usage.

Moreover, exemplarization allows us to explain the basic role of the particular in representation. The particular is itself a sign, a sensory sign, and not merely the means to refer to a genuine sign, a predicate. Thus, exemplarization of an individual enables us to explain how something ineffable, the sensory particular, can allow us to obtain knowledge of what the content of a painting is like by being part and parcel of our conception of the content. By being the sign that effects representation in exemplarization, the exemplar becomes autonomous with respect to linguistic description rather than being dependent upon language as a kind of referential surrogate for a predicate.

The difference between exemplarization and exemplification reveals a deeper philosophical difference. Goodman thinks of linguistic representation at the level of predication as being based on convention and the social entrenchment of a predicate. Talk of properties is, for Goodman, paraphrastic for talk about entrenched predicates. To be sure, Goodman insists on the potential for novelty achieved through metaphorical predication. Though there is genius in his development of a nominalistic account of representation based on denotation and in his insight that metaphorical usage is also

based on denotation, Goodman's semantics does not take adequate account of the psychology and phenomenology of artistic representation. Consider the claim, 'paintings of Olympia are paintings that represent Olympia.' Goodman's semantic analysis of such remarks reduces talk about Olympia to talk about Olympia-pictures. There is a brilliance in the analysis, and if one is only concerned about formulating truth conditions for claims like 'that is a painting of Olympia,' one may rest content with the analysis. But there are features that remain unexplained, suggesting another kind of account may prove more satisfactory. For example, there is the phenomenology that one sees a female in the picture (Wollheim 1980). Moreover, the female in the picture is a goddess, Olympia, in the make-believe world of Greek mythology (Walton 1990). The phenomenology for someone familiar with mythology and the artistic tradition is one of seeing a goddess, Olympia, in the painting. Moreover, one sees Olympia in a special way, which connects it with other paintings of Olympia. One knows what Olympia is like in the painting.

My suggestion is that one knows what Olympia is like in the painting in the same way that one knows what red is like when one first sees red as Mary did. The sensory experience of the painting is exemplarized to yield a representation of the content, namely Olympia, as she appears in the painting. In this example, the sensory experience exemplarized is combined with a general conception of a mythological figure. One knows what the content of the painting is like as a result of exemplarizing a sensory experience to obtain a conception of the content which interacts with antecedent knowledge of Olympia. The antecedent knowledge may be a combination of the mythology of Olympia as a goddess combined with knowledge of what the contents of other paintings are like. Thus the antecedent knowledge of Olympia is already a combination of descriptive content and sensory content resulting from the exemplarization of experiences of other paintings. Moreover, the present exemplarization may conflict with the antecedent representation of Olympia when knowledge of what Olympia is like in the present painting, which might be a feminist revision of an early painting of Olympia or the controversial painting by Manet, is intended to provoke a revised conception of Olympia. The knowledge that we obtain from exemplarization might be the novel result of a revised conception of Olympia.

The foregoing remarks raise questions about the nature of the content of the painting. It is important to distinguish the content of the painting from a model for the painting, whether it is a person or another work of art. Should we say, with Goodman (1968), that the content of the painting can be characterized in a way that avoids talk about a non-existent intentional object, Olympia, by taking talk of the painting as a painting of Olympia to be

talk of an Olympia-picture? I have already noted that this characterization fails to capture the phenomenology of seeing Olympia in the painting. It also fails to accommodate the fact that the novelty of the painting, which yields a new conception of Olympia, would at the same time alter our conception of Olympia-pictures. Goodman could, of course, admit as much, but his account of exemplification would fail to explain how the novelty is introduced into our conception of Olympia and of Olympia-pictures. For if the experience of the painting is exemplified in Goodman's sense, then it refers to the predicate, 'Olympia-picture,' which, as it becomes entrenched in our usage, might fail to denote the present unconventional representation. When, on the contrary, we recognize that the experience is exemplarized, thereby introducing a novel conception using the exemplar as a sign which applies to a class of experiences picked out by the exemplar, the novelty of the sensory conception is part and parcel of the exemplarized experience of the painting. Incorporation of the novel exemplar in exemplarization yields a novel conception of Olympia as well as a novel conception of an Olympia-picture.

## CONTENT AND ONTOLOGY

At this point in the discussion, a question about the ontological status of Olympia naturally arises. Olympia is an intentional object that, in fact, does not exist. I assume, with Reid (1785/2002) and those who followed, most notably Brentano, that it is an uncontroversial feature of conception that one can conceive of things that do not exist. The conception of the content of the painting exists, of course, as a mental state of the observer, even though the intentional object of the content does not exist. Of course, the sensory experience which is exemplarized to yield the exemplarized content is something that also exists. Exemplarization involves generalization from the exemplar to other individuals and is, we have noted, a conception that is both particular, since the particular has a functional role, and general, since the functional role involves generalization from the particular. This account is close to that of both Reid (1785) and Hume (1739–40), particularly when the latter explains how a particular idea may stand for other particulars and thus become general.

None of this talk of generalizing commits one to the existence of properties, types, or any other entity that is not an individual or a particular. It is worth noting, however, that a tenable psychological account would involve generalizing from an individual quality, say the individual red quality that Mary experienced, which exists as an individual and is not

a general property shared by other individuals. It acquires the function of representing other individuals, of course, but that does not mean that the individual red quality is itself anything other than an individual.

There is an illusion created by the mental activity of generalizing. Once we generalize from one individual to others, we may think of them as having something in common, which they do, and conclude that there is something that exists, a type, sort, or property, which they share. That inference is fallacious. We can, of course, think of a property or general quality that they share, the general property of being red, for example, but to think of something, of some intentional object, does not entail the existence of it. As Reid (1785/2002) correctly observed, we can, if we wish, say that all red things share a common property, but that does not commit us to the existence of the property. We may, instead, note that it is only the general conception of the property that exists, though the property is a property of things that do exist and it itself has properties. Talk about intentional objects, though it requires that we have general conceptions, in no way commits us to the conclusion that those objects exist, whether they are individuals such as Olympia, or general properties such as the property of being a goddess. In short, the spirit of nominalism affirming that everything that exists is an individual is consistent with this account.

Indeed, as Reid noted, but Hume failed to note, the claim that the individuals falling under some general conception resemble each other does not commit us to the existence of any general property of resemblance either. To say that two things resemble each other raises the question of in what respect, or in terms of what properties, they resemble each other. The property of resemblance is no more basic than other properties, and may be equally regarded as an intentional object. This is not to deny that there may be individual qualities of resemblance, but admitting individual qualities does not thereby commit us to the existence of some general property of resemblance. This form of nominalism need not be accepted in order to accept the account of exemplarization proposed above. My claim is merely that exemplarization is consistent with the nominalistic claim that only individuals and individual qualities exist.

## **EMOTIONAL AND ABSTRACT CONTENT**

With this brief excursion into metaphysics, let us return to the theory of exemplarization and consider its implications for an account of our knowledge of abstract art as well as of other art forms. Moreover, let us consider how the content of that knowledge might be extended to explain the emotional content



of works of art. Finally, let us consider how the knowledge of what a visual work of art is like relates to discursive knowledge of the work of art.

Exemplarization of the sensory experience involves generalization from the exemplar to other individuals, as we have noted. The generalization will be influenced by innate dispositions, social conventions, and cognitive schemata (Gombrich 1972) that have been incorporated in the individual, as well as by more idiosyncratic dispositions derived from personal experience. The role played by innate dispositions, as well as that played by social and personal associations, accounts for the emotional content of art.

Let us consider the innate component without assuming that it is more important than other influences. Some sensory experiences have an emotional content because the exemplar experienced has the emotional content. There are some innate responses to sensory experiences that connect them with emotions. The infant sees something fearful in certain expressions of the face and cries in response. My conjecture is that some sensory data are innately connected with emotions in a way that is encapsulated, in the sense that the response is not entirely extinguished when background information indicates that the response is inappropriate. There are expressions of the face that are not feared by the adult when they occur in an actor, but the meaning of each such expression remains even when that adult has information which overrides the innate impression. An analogy is the impression of a bent stick when a straight stick is inserted into water. The impression that the stick is bent remains even when we have information that overrides the innate impression. These impressions are encapsulated in the sensory experience because of our innate response system. I am not claiming that all emotional responses are innate, for many are due to associations, of course. My point is rather that the emotional impression may be encapsulated in the sensory experience, given our innate responses, in just the way that the appearance of the bent stick is encapsulated in our sensory experience. Thus, the emotions are in the sensory experience, and therefore in the exemplar experienced when observing the work of art. In this case, emotions are in paintings in the same way that shapes are in paintings. The exemplarized experience contains the emotion in the same way that it contains shapes. Moreover, associated emotions are in the painting in the same way that associated shapes are. We know that emotions are part of the content of the work of art, that it is sad or joyous, for example, because those emotions are encapsulated or associated with the sensory experience exemplarized. When we know what the painting is like as a result of exemplarizing our experience, we know that part of what the painting is like is that it is sad or joyous.

Notice, moreover, that the content of a painting might be abstract. When we observe an abstract painting, there is a problem of understanding it.



Suppose you recognize an Albers painting, a Mondrian, or a Rothko. In that case, you know what an Albers, a Mondrian, or a Rothko is like. You generalize from a sensory experience. You obtain a general conception by exemplarizing the sensory particular. The exemplar is part and parcel of your general conception of the content of the painting. However, the way you generalize and, consequently, your general conception of the content may be influenced by background knowledge that you have about art. For all that, someone less experienced might generalize from the exemplar in ways that enable him or her to recognize an Albers, a Mondrian, or a Rothko quite as efficiently as one who is more learned. The general conception, which has the functional role of enabling the subject to identify the denotation of the conception, might not incorporate background information about art into the general conception. On the other hand, the exemplarized conception might be combined with more information of the history and conventions of art to yield a more complicated and sophisticated conception.

## **DISCURSIVE KNOWLEDGE OF ART**

The kind of knowledge of what a painting is like that is obtained from the exemplarization of sensory experience, is connected with discursive knowledge of a work of art. Exemplarization might be used by a critic or art historian to communicate discursive knowledge about the work. Such discursive knowledge, which presupposes that the claim to knowledge can be justified, may contain an appeal to exemplarized experience for part of the justification. The historian or critic may, as Isenberg (1949) suggests, make claims the justification of which requires that some meaning of the claims be filled in by sensory experience. Thus, the critic or historian may make a claim to the effect that the person reading what each has written will agree with the writer about what the painting is like once it is observed. On the account offered, this means that the exemplarized experience may confirm what the critic or historian has claimed. The test of the claims rests upon a test of sense and the exemplarization thereof.

Discursive knowledge, as I have argued (Lehrer 1997), depends on the trustworthiness of the subjects in how they seek to accept what is true and avoid accepting what is false. The trustworthiness of the subject is enhanced by conceptual use of exemplarization, which is functionally connected with the truth of what is accepted to yield knowledge of what the painting is like. At the same time, the trustworthiness of the subject for those who consider her claims depends on whether they are guided by her discourse to exemplarize in a way that confirms what she says. If they fill in the meaning

of her discourse by exemplarizing in a way that confirms her claims, that will confirm her trustworthiness for them and sustain her claim to expertise. The test of discursive knowledge is, therefore, contained in what the painting is like for the observer from the exemplarization of sensory experience. Discursive knowledge claims about beauty and other evaluative features may also be tested and confirmed by the exemplarization of the sensory experience of those qualities. This controversial contention must remain, however, the subject of subsequent research.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

## Chapter 2

### **PICTURES, KNOWLEDGE, AND POWER: THE CASE OF T. J. CLARK**

Derek Matravers

It is uncontroversial that the content of some paintings can serve as historical evidence. Holbein's paintings of the English court provide evidence of, for example, clothing styles of the period. Whether a particular painting is reliable in this respect will be a matter of historical inquiry into that particular painting. Was there a particular mode of dress that was worn only when sitting for paintings? Did the painter have a reason to misrepresent his subjects? No issues are raised here that do not apply quite generally to historical enquiry into primary sources.

In an influential diagnosis of the problems and prospects of his discipline, the art historian and theorist T. J. Clark quotes from, and comments on, Georg Lukács's 1922 essay, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat:"

Let's look at that simple and curious phrase, "the really important historians of the nineteenth century," and the way the examples that come to mind include two art historians out of three names cited! What an age was this when Riegl and Dvorak were the real historians, worrying away at the fundamental questions – the conditions of consciousness, the nature of 'representation'? (1974: 248)

Why, Clark asks, should art historians be cited as "the really important historians"? As we saw above, art is part of the historical record and therefore available as evidence, but, first, one would not have thought it was a particularly large part of the historical record and, second, one does not need to be anything more than a garden variety historian to make use of it. The answer

to Clark's question is, of course, that Clark believes (as, presumably, does Lukács) that paintings are not simply evidence in the sense described above. Paintings are, in addition, evidence of a particular sort that it requires a specialist type of historian to access. I am going to examine and assess this claim by looking at Clark's discussion of a particular painting, Manet's *Olympia*. We can approach this discussion by way of a puzzle. *Olympia* is clearly modeled on Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. The central figure in both paintings is a naked woman on a bed, in essentially the same pose; the black woman bringing flowers and the cat have echoes in Titian's servant, orchid, and dog. Despite this, of the seventy odd critics who reviewed Manet's work, only two mentioned the earlier picture (Clark 1985: 93). This might be explained, as Clark admits, by the critics registering their contempt for the result of Manet's efforts. In order to grasp the more interesting explanation that Clark produces, we need first to take a detour through Clark's theory of art.

Although a Marxist, Clark is careful to distance himself from the usual applications of Marx's thought to criticism.

I am not interested in the notion of works of art 'reflecting' ideologies, social relations, or history. Equally, I do not want to talk about history as 'background' to the work of art – as something which is essentially absent from the work of art and its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance. (The intrusion of history is discovered, it seems, by 'common sense:' there is a special category of historical references which can be identified in this way.) I want also to reject the idea that the artist's point of reference as a social being is, *a priori*, the artistic community. On this view, history is transmitted to the artist by some fixed route, through some invariable system of mediations: the artist responds to the values and ideas of the artistic community (in our period that means, for the best artists, the ideology of the avant-garde), which in turn are altered by changes in the general values and ideas of society, which in turn are determined by historical conditions. For example, Courbet is influenced by Realism which is influenced by Positivism which is the product of Capitalist Materialism. One can sprinkle as much detail on the nouns in that sentence as one likes; it is the verbs which are the matter.

Lastly, I do not want the social history of art to depend on intuitive analogies between form and ideological content – on saying, for example, that the lack of compositional focus in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is an expression of the painter's egalitarianism, or that Manet's fragmented composition in the extraordinary *View of the Paris World's*

*Fair* (1867) is a visual equivalent of human alienation in the industrial society (Clark 1973: 10–11).

The alternative he offers is, broadly and briefly, as follows: “what I want to explain are the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes” (Clark 1973: 12; see also Clark 1980*b*, 1985: 6).

The overall theory can be gleaned from passages in several books he has written over the years and can be summed up in the following seven propositions (Clark 1973, 1985, 1999; cf. Clark 1974, 1980*a*).

1. The social world and artifacts in the social world are best investigated by treating it, or them, as collections of signs (or ‘texts’).
2. These texts need to be seen against a background of meaning-giving structures.
3. Amongst these meaning-giving structures are ideologies.
4. Ideologies militate against the possibility of certain representations.
5. A work of art can be the place in which the dominant ideology is challenged.
6. The record of this challenge can be traced by looking at the content and reception of the work.
7. This record can be evaluated at a broader level than ideology, namely, within the explanatory framework of Historical Materialism.

I shall expound on these briefly, but their full force will become apparent when we work through our example. Applying proposition (1) to pictures, it could mean one or both of two things. First, the arrangements of paint on the picture surface could be a sign for whatever can be seen in that arrangement: for example, a certain arrangement of paint will be a sign for a well-dressed man. Second, what can be seen in the picture surface could be a sign for something else: for example, a well-dressed man could be a sign for wealth or even injustice. I shall leave all three options of what is meant (the first, the second, or both) open. Proposition (2) follows, provided (as is plausible) we are dealing neither with natural meaning nor with ‘one-off’ meanings.

Proposition (3) could be interpreted in a number of different ways, as the meanings of ‘ideology’ are many and various (Geuss 1981: 4–44). Clark has this to say on the subject: “I mean by ideologies (the concept seems to me indelibly plural, although all ideologies feed off each other and share the same function) those bodies of beliefs, images, values, and techniques of representation by which social classes, in conflict with each other, attempt to

‘naturalise’ their particular histories” (1974: 251; see also 1985: 3). In short, the ideology of a particular social class is the way members of that class view the world. These views are structured by the interests of that class, making some historically contingent phenomena appear part of the natural order of things. Consider a classic example: it is part of the ideology of the bourgeois that capitalism is natural and inevitable, arising from inevitable means of exchange in the state of nature. Hence, the bourgeois, in the grip of this ideology, may be unable to read, for example, a painting of a wealthy couple enjoying a walk as meaning oppression or injustice. How could it, if it simply depicts the results of the natural order of things?

For Clark, the nature of works of art allows them to be a place in which certain ideologies are challenged:

The making of a work of art is one historical process among other acts, events and structures – it is a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; but in its turn it can alter and at times disrupt these structures. A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it works that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology (1973: 13; see also 1974: 251).

Part of the work of the art historian is to investigate this challenge through the way the work was received; to note which meanings were unreadable to which sections of the contemporary audience. The work’s success or failure at challenging ideology can then be judged against the broader concerns of the class struggle. Armed with this methodology, Clark is in a position to claim that art is an apparently powerful source of knowledge:

the work takes a certain set of technical procedures and traditional forms, and makes them the tools with which to alter ideology – to transcribe it, to represent it. This can be anodyne, illustration: we are surrounded by duplicates of ideology: but the process of work creates the space in which, at certain moments, an ideology can be appraised (1974: 251).

By interpreting the work of art and the way the art is received, we acquire knowledge of the prevailing ideology; that is, what it did, and what it did not, make invisible. In other words, art provides a route to historically interesting information concerning the content of the ideology of the public of the time.

Let us return to *Olympia* to solve the puzzle described above. Much of Clark's work here is empirical, and I shall simply allow that his claims are well grounded. Where possible, I shall put them in their weakest form. Clark claims that it was part of the ideological background of bourgeois Paris of the 1860s that women were seen to fall into certain categories: the three he mentions are honest woman, courtesan, and prostitute. The first category plays no role in the argument, except as a contrast to the other two. A courtesan was distinguished from an honest woman, in that the former sold sex for money. She was distinguished from the prostitute, in that being a courtesan involved a dual role. On the one hand, there was – behind closed doors – sex. On the other hand, in the public world, there was the mask of respectability; she played at being the honest woman. She was someone with whom one could appear in public, go to parties, and so on. Prostitutes did not have the second role. They entered into commercial transactions in which generally a lower-class female sold sex to a middle-class male.

The distinction between a prostitute and a courtesan does not map, in any simple way, onto the distinction within painting of the naked and the nude. The courtesan, Clark says, “was not an easy subject for visual art” (1985: 116). When artists set out to depict courtesans, they frequently found themselves revealing their role as purveyors of sex. As Clark nicely puts it (quoting a critic of the period), they “set out for Athens each morning and ended in the Rue de Breda” (1985: 112). The depiction of prostitutes per se was generally restricted to didactic paintings that illustrated, allegorically, the dangers of that profession. However, the categories under which women were viewed did put pressure on the way they were depicted in painting. Approaching things from the other end, let us look at the categories of the naked and the nude. These categories have, of course, been much discussed in art history – most famously by Clark's namesake, Kenneth Clark, who puts his view as follows:

The nude gains its enduring value from the fact that it reconciles several contrary states. It takes the most sensual and immediately interesting object, the human body, and puts it out of reach of time and desire; it takes the most purely rational concept of which mankind is capable, mathematical order, and makes it a delight to the senses; and it takes the vague fears of the unknown and sweetens them by showing that the gods are like men, and may be worshipped for their life-giving beauty rather than their death-dealing powers (K. Clark 1960: 22).

T. J. Clark's views are both similar and different. He agrees that “the human body is put out of reach of time and desire,” or, at least, of particular desire:

The nude is one important form – and there are very few – in which sexuality can be put on show in the nineteenth century. It is the place in which the body is revealed, given its attributes, brought into order, and made out to be unproblematic. It is the frankness of the bourgeoisie – here, after all, is what Woman looks like; she can be known in her nakedness without too much danger. That is because her body is separate from her sex (1985: 130).

The idea of the nude, for T. J. Clark, is that it exhibits a general sexuality, and that the naked body is not the object of a particular sexual desire. The form of the nude was a barrier to the invocation of the world of commercial sex. This cultural hope was breaking down by 1865. Academic paintings of the nude by painters such as Bougereau and Cabanel were overtly sexual. Part of the scandal surrounding *Olympia* was due to the artist making this explicit.

Sex was supposedly expelled outright from Woman's body, only to reappear within it as a set of uncontrolled inflection – those rolling eyes and orgasmic turns of the hip that the critics spent their time finding decent ways to denounce. The nude became embarrassing; and what *Olympia* did... is insist on that embarrassment and give it visual form (1985: 131).

Clark's basic claim is that *Olympia* plays with, or parodies, the form of the nude in a way that made it incomprehensible to its contemporary audience. The categories for women that were part of the contemporary bourgeois ideology were such that a bourgeois audience could not give the painting (the set of signs that constitute the painting) a coherent reading. The reason why only two critics evoked the comparison with Titian's *Venus* is that people could not understand *Olympia* as a nude. Clark substantiates this claim with a detailed scrutiny of those aspects of the painting which bear the weight of making its categorization problematic. I shall examine that discussion below.

Throughout the argument Clark, in accord with proposition (1), discusses the picture as a set of signs to be read. *Olympia* is "a kind of travesty of the old language of the nude" (1985: 131). Manet's work exhibits a "failure of meaning," a "failure to signify," or is "unreadable" (1980b: 22, 25; 1999: 2). Later, summarizing his claims, he says:

*Olympia's* rules could be stated as follows. The signifiers of sex are there in plenty, on the body and its companions, but they are drawn up in a contradictory order; one that is unfinished, or, rather, more than one; orders interfering with one another, signs which indicate quite



different places for *Olympia* in the taxonomy of women – and none of which she occupies (1985: 137).

The semiotic view is clearly important to Clark's argument. Without it, he could not have propositions (2), (3), and possibly (4). *Olympia* is an unreadable sign, as it simultaneously indicates different places in the 1865 Parisian bourgeois taxonomy of women. Although Clark does not discuss the matter, one feature of the semiotic view is that the relation between the sign and its meaning is conventional. What a sign means is given by the background meaning-conveying conditions. The categories of prostitute and courtesan, of the naked and the nude, are not (to use a phrase of John Mackie's) part of "the fabric of the universe." Certain properties of a picture indicate prostitute or courtesan because of the background ideology – it is a conventional not a natural matter.

The fact that the meaning relation is one of convention allows Clark to make some strong claims. There is no non-conventional restriction on what signs in the picture can mean: they can mean whatever the background ideology allows them to mean. Clark says, for example, that nakedness is the "sign of class" (1985: 146). In an earlier book, he claimed that "ideology is what the picture is, and what the picture is not... . We might say that 'style' is the form of ideology" (1974: 251). In the introduction to the book on which I have focussed, Clark writes:

In general, the terms of modernism are not to be conceived as separate from the particular projects – the specific attempts at meaning – in which they are restated. An example of that truism would be the notorious history of modernism's concern for 'flatness'... . My point is simply that flatness in its heyday *was* these various meanings and valuations; they were its substance, they were what it was seen *as*; their particularity was what made flatness a matter to be painted (1985: 12–13; see also 1982).

The "various meanings and valuations" Clark lists are "the popular," "modernity," and "the evenness of seeing itself, the actual form of our knowledge of things."

There is a distinction between the specific claims Clark makes about *Olympia*, and these latter claims. It is important to take seriously Clark's claim that the content of the painting is best discussed in semiological terms. Instead of using words that describe visual experience (we see – or, rather, fail to see – *Olympia* as a nude), he talks of the *language* of the nude and a *failure of signification*. Although Clark puts his points in terms of signs and meanings, he is clearly talking about signs and meanings we access visually.

However, in the stronger claims that he makes (nakedness being a sign of class, style being the form of ideology, flatness being a sign of modernity) the sign is visual but the meaning is not. In his weaker claims, we can slip back into talk of vision and say that we see (or fail to see) *Olympia* as a nude. It is not at all clear that it makes sense to say that we *see* nakedness as class, style as ideology and flatness as modernity, as none of the second terms of each pair refers to something visible. To repeat the point made above, the semiotic premise allows this, as meaning is a relation that easily crosses the boundary between the visual and the non-visual.

The power of the semiological premise is that it allows Clark to build virtually limitless content into the surface of pictures. However, one looks in vain in Clark's work for an argument for the premise. What one finds instead looks to be a recommendation that we adopt this semiological talk as a convenient *façon de parler*.

It sounds right – it corresponds to normal usage – to say that any social order consists primarily of classifications. What else do we usually mean by the word 'society' but a set of means for solidarity, distance, belonging, and exclusion? These things are needed pre-eminently to enable the production of material life – to fix an order in which men and women can make their living and have some confidence that they will continue to do so. Orders of this sort appear to be established most potently by representations or systems of signs, and it does not seem to me to trivialise the concept of 'social formation' – or necessarily to give it an idealist as opposed to a materialist gloss – to describe it as a hierarchy of representations. That way one avoids the worst pitfalls of vulgar Marxism, in particular the difficulties involved in claiming that the basis of any social formation is some brute facticity made of sterner and solider stuff than signs – for instance, the stuff of economic life (1985: 6).

What this passage suggests is that Clark does not think the semiological premise is essential to his argument. That is, that his argument could be reconstructed without treating paintings as quasi-linguistic signs, but rather as visual images. An additional benefit of such a reconstruction is that it would remove a hostage to fortune in Clark's account, as the view that paintings are read as texts in a quasi-linguistic manner is untenable (Wollheim 1993; Hopkins 1998: 13–14). (Similarly, it should be noted, what I take to be important in Clark's account does not depend on a second hostage to fortune: a Marxist model of explanation.) Fortunately, Clark's position can be reconstructed without much difficulty. The general claim, that interpreting the painting and examining its reception is a reliable source

of knowledge of the ideology of the time, is preserved. Furthermore, an interesting consequence emerges concerning the limits of our understanding of painting. Finally, the reconstruction indicates a limit as to what Clark can and cannot build into the surface of a painting. What emerges is a restricted version of the overall thesis. This is not, however, a loss, as the stronger claims Clark makes do not seem tenable.

To reconstruct Clark's argument we need to use what Barrie Falk has called "a sophisticated kind of phenomenal experience," an 's-phenomenal experience,' for short (1993: 67). Falk's topic is visual processing and what it might tell us about consciousness. Falk accepts the claim, widely believed in the philosophy of mind, that the way in which a figure is processed can produce a change in the way the figure is given in experience (this he calls 'the processing paradigm'). His distinctive claim is that disruptions in this processing can give rise to an affective reaction on behalf of the viewer, a reaction which manifests itself in the experience of the object. The principal example Falk gives is of figures (such as a triangle resting on its point) that look a certain way because our experience incorporates an imaginative anticipation of how we would experience their movement. We see some figures as stable and others as precarious. Other examples Falk gives are more closely related to our concerns.

Consider Wittgenstein's example of a cursive inscription of the word 'pleasure' and next to it the same inscription reversed (Wittgenstein 1953: 198). The one will differ in appearance from the other just as some arbitrary shape and its reverse will differ. But there is a different difference, Wittgenstein notes. One inscription looks 'neater' than the other. Now clearly this is a result of the fact that the first, unlike the second, activates and is responsive to entrenched processing habits. Recognizing a letter sets up dispositions to look for further letters rather than numerals, expectations about what the further letters will be, and so on; and these are all satisfied. But this will not explain why the inscription has a neat *look*; nor will the fact that one may have reflective knowledge of having processed it successfully.

What is needed here is a version of the structure I have suggested. Processing such objects will be a complex or simple matter. Later parts of what one surveys may unproblematically meet initially aroused expectations or, instead, suggest lots of plausible but conflicting hypotheses. More or less of the figure may have to be discarded as visual noise in order to make sense of it, and so on. These are not features of the processing one has to be conscious of... But one can become conscious of them. Their presence, plus appropriate training,

may enable the perceiver to apply such s-phenomenal concepts as 'neat' and 'scrappy.' Being disposed to apply them is to be aware of the thing's distinctive look; and its having that look is for it to have induced in one, in the complex way I have described, a particular affective state (Falk 1993: 69).

As this passage makes clear, s-phenomenal experiences cannot be explained only in terms of the processing paradigm. That paradigm will not account for why the word looks neat or scrappy. The explanation, rather, is that the word having been written backwards disrupts our processing, bringing about an affective reaction, which is then recruited into the experience of the word, giving it a particular look.

One might think that concepts such as 'neat' and 'scrappy' are too simple to illuminate concepts such as the nude, since the latter, unlike the former, has a content given by complicated social and artistic practices. It follows from this that whatever expectations guide our processing an image as a nude will have their source in the same rich social and artistic practices. However, the general point Falk is making is independent of the source of the expectations that guide our processing. Provided that we have some expectations of the way an object should look, that the way in which we process this object leads to an affective response, and that the affective response then feeds back into the experience of the object, an s-phenomenal experience will result. Falk himself considers more socially-loaded examples than 'neat' and 'scrappy:' for example, our experience of starlings as *ungainly* birds. Let us consider, then, whether Falk's notion of the s-phenomenal can usefully be applied to the case of *Olympia*.

The category of the nude is perhaps the most familiar in art. It has, according to Kenneth Clark, "dominated sculpture and painting at two of the chief epochs in their history" (1960: xxi). Hence, anyone who knows art will, in recognizing a painting as being of a nude, have certain expectations as to what the painting will look like. Furthermore, seeing an image as a nude will set up expectations that guide the processing of the image. Whether the viewer could become conscious of this processing will be considered shortly.

T. J. Clark's claim, that *Olympia* could not be read as a nude, can be taken as the claim that *Olympia* could not easily be processed according to that visual category. Indeed, it is natural to read the details of his discussion that way. Clearly, at first sight, *Olympia* falls into the category of the nude (because, among other things, it so strongly echoes Titian's *Venus*, the central example of the genre). In his discussion, Clark indicates how features of *Olympia* violate the expectations set up by our placing it in this category. It is important to recognize the claim is not merely that we

notice that certain properties of *Olympia* are incongruous when we consider it as a nude; the claim is stronger than that. It is that disruptions to the processing of our visual experience changes the way the figure is given to us in experience. In the case Falk cites from Wittgenstein, a word is seen as neat. The neatness is part of our experience of it. There is not a single word that is the analogue to 'neat' in our experience of *Olympia*. Nonetheless, the difficulties the painting gives rise to in our seeing it as a nude, despite that being the appropriate category under which to see it, has analogous consequences for our experience of the painting.

Let us take, from Clark's discussion, four ways in which Manet painted *Olympia* so as to give her a particular rather than a general sexuality, thereby disrupting our expectations of the nude. First, *Olympia* disrupts the characteristic way in which a nude addresses the spectator. There is in the nude, says Clark, "a candour, that dreamy offering of self, that looking which is not quite looking:"

The woman's body had to be arranged in precise and definite relation to the viewer's eye. It has to be placed at a distance, near enough for seeing, far enough for propriety. It had to be put at a determinate height, neither so high that the woman became inaccessible and merely grand, nor so low that she turned into matter for scrutiny of a clinical or prurient kind (1985: 133).

*Olympia*'s mode of address is, however, different. The viewer is

offered an outward gaze: a pair of jet-black pupils, a slight asymmetry of the lids, a mouth with a curiously smudged and broken corner, features half adhering to the plain oval of the face. A look was thus constructed which seemed direct and reserved, in a way which was close to the classic face of the nude. It was close, but so is parody (1985: 133).

Secondly, the way the body is painted is similarly out of place, without being disruptive enough to make the visual category inappropriate.

There is a lack of articulation here. On its own this is not too disconcerting, and in a sense it tallies well with the conventions of the nude, where the body is offered – if the trick is done – as just this kind of infinite territory, uncorseted and full, on which the spectator is free to impose his imaginary definitions. But the odd thing in *Olympia*'s case is the way this uncertainty is bounded, or interrupted, by the hard edges and the cursive grey. The body is in part tied down by the drawing,

held in place quite harshly – by the hand, the black bootlace round the neck, the lines of charcoal shadow (1985: 135).

Thirdly, Clark considers the extreme reaction that critics had to Olympia's hand. A cursory glance would seem to show that the hand is no differently placed from that of other canonical nudes. A problem that Titian faced (and, indeed, all other painters of the nude faced or face) is how to portray the genital region. According to Clark, this problem is exacerbated by a demand upon the nude to "enact the lack of a phallus;" that is, disguise the psychoanalytically problematic difference between the subject of the painting and the (male) observer of the painting. Titian's solution, which was also that used in Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, was to cover the genitals with the nude's hand. This does not draw attention to itself, enacting the lack of phallus and disguising it. Once again, *Olympia* subverts the convention from within.

Her hand enraged and exalted the critics as nothing else did, because it failed to enact the lack of phallus (which is not to say it quite signified the opposite). When the critics said it was shameless, flexed, in a state of contraction, dirty and shaped like a toad, they toyed with various meanings, none of them obscure. The genitals are in the hand, toadlike; and the hand is tensed, hard-edged and definite; not an absence, not a thing which yields or includes and need not be noticed (Clark 1985: 135).

Finally, in the nude, says Clark, hair is the prime signifier of sex. Pubic hair is disallowed, as is hair in other places: the armpit, nipple, stomach, and legs. Instead, nudes usually have a "profusion of tresses." "This kind of hirsuteness is a strong sign and a safe one, for hair let down is decent and excessive at the same time; it is allowed disorder, simple luxuriance, slight wantonness; and none of these qualities need be alarming, since hair on the head can be combed out and pinned up again in due course (Clark 1985: 136). There is, if one looks carefully, a mass of brown hair against which Olympia is resting her head. That is not, however, the only place where hair appears on the body. One can see a "line which runs from Olympia's navel to her ribs." It is not clear what it is – Clark speculates that it might be meant as a shadow ("but that would be odd on a body missing so many others"). To see it as hair is to see it as a strong and particular sexual characteristic. Once again, the sexuality of the particular person is undercutting the category of the nude.

Clark's original thesis was that the contemporary record of a painting's reception was reliable evidence of the ideology of the viewers of those

paintings. From the absences in the critics' reaction, one could work out what their ideology failed to make meaningful. The revised thesis is similar. From what the critics said about *Olympia*, we can conclude that they were attempting to experience it as a nude. As certain visual features of the painting failed to satisfy the expectations seeing as a nude had engendered, they experienced an affective reaction which then fed into their experience of the picture. Falk admits to having no general account of the qualitative nature of the experiential properties associated with the s-phenomenal terms:

What stands to the state that causes me to say 'blue' in response to some reflectance property as disrupted processing habits stand to the state which causes me to say 'ungainly' in response to shape? To have presented my argument in terms of *qualitative* experience relation us to the world otherwise than by thought would put a weight on that notion which I do not know how to make it bear (1993: 72).

Whatever experiential properties the critics found, they described in terms (such as 'neat' and 'scrappy') analogous to Falk's s-phenomenal terms. *Olympia* is described as 'incorrect,' 'unfinished,' 'evasive,' and so on. As with the earlier case, one could, with effort, become conscious of why these terms seem to apply. If contemporary critics had become conscious of why they were applying these terms, then, to quote Clark, "art criticism might have begun" (1985: 146). However, they did not, and it was left to Clark to bring about such a consciousness. One can then go on to tell the further story (which I have not covered in this paper) about what the prevalence of that visual category, and the manner in which Manet succeeded in undermining it, tells us about the broader society.

The descriptions we give of the content of paintings are not always the same as the descriptions we would give of the same content seen face to face. Sometimes they are: for example, 'a milkmaid,' 'a young woman lying naked on a bed.' However, there are categories that apply to paintings ('nude,' 'still life,' 'landscape') that have a proper use in the former descriptions, yet which differ from any (if any) use they have in the latter. In a well-known essay, Kendall Walton has described the role these categories have in criticism and appreciation. He divides the features of each category into three sorts.

A feature of a work of art is *standard* with respect to a (perceptually distinguishable) category just in case it is among those in virtue of which works in that category belong to that category – that is, just in case the lack of that feature would disqualify, or tend to disqualify, a work from that category. A feature is *variable* with respect to a category just in case

it has nothing to do with works' belonging to that category; the possession or lack of the feature is irrelevant to whether a work qualifies for the category. Finally, a *contra-standard* feature with respect to a category is the absence of a standard feature with respect to that category – that is, a feature whose presence tends to *disqualify* works as members of the category (1970: 339).

One lesson of Clark's reading of *Olympia* is how fine-grained these distinctions can get. *Olympia* has features that are standard for the nude (the gaze, the absence of clothing, the hand covering the genitals), yet these features are presented in a way that makes them contra-standard. This disrupts the 'perceptual gestalt,' which means the spectator cannot see the category of nude in the work. However, all the features which suggest that this is exactly the category within which the painting ought to be perceived are present – hence, the inarticulacy of the critical response.

In summary, Clark's view does not depend upon subscribing to the doubtful proposition (1); his position can be reconstructed along more plausible lines using the notion of s-phenomenal experiences. This brings in its wake some mitigation of Clark's view. The reconstruction works because the concept of the nude picks out something that can be visually presented to us. To see *Olympia* as simply naked is a different visual experience from seeing *Olympia* as nude. This visual experience can be disrupted, leaving the observer inarticulate. We can now lend more weight to the earlier assertion that Clark is not entitled to his stronger claims. It would only make sense to say that one could see flatness as modernity or nakedness as class if 'modernity' and 'class' either referred to something that shows up straightforwardly in our visual experience, or are s-phenomenal. Yet it is notoriously difficult to find the correct place to draw the line between those concepts that could be part of our visual experience and those concepts that could not be. Given Clark's detailed work, it looks as if 'the nude' does play a part in how some visual experiences are presented to us. However, similarly detailed work would have to be done on 'modernity' and 'class' before we could accede to Clark's view. It is difficult to see that his could be done; in brief, while we can see an object as a nude, we cannot see an object as modernity or class. Clark's semiological premise allows him to claim that aspects of the picture surface could mean all manner of things. However, if he wants to make the narrower claim (as it seems he does) that all manner of things can be seen *in* the picture, or that observers can *see* aspects of the picture as all manner of things, he will need to be able to show that what, according to his view, can be seen can actually show up in visual experience. The result will be a more restricted, less exciting, but ultimately more defensible set of claims.



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## Chapter 3

### NARRATING THE TRUTH (MORE OR LESS)

Stacie Friend

While aestheticians have devoted substantial attention to the possibility of acquiring knowledge from fiction, little of this attention has been directed at the acquisition of factual information. This neglect does not stem from a denial that we acquire such information from fictions; it is usually taken for granted that one can learn a great deal about whaling from Melville's *Moby Dick* or about World War I mining from Sebastian Faulk's *Birdsong*. The neglect can instead be traced to the assumption that the task of aesthetics is to explain the *special* cognitive value of fiction. While the value of many works of non-fiction may be measured, in part, by their ability to transmit information, most works of fiction lack such a didactic aim. Thus, many of us conclude that the transmission of information is irrelevant to the value of such works.

Contributing to the force of this conclusion are two other commonly held ideas. The first is that the standard aim of fiction – presumably, to give us a good story – is in direct conflict with the acquisition of factual knowledge. Since real events do not follow neat narrative structures, writing a good story might seem to oblige a few of Huck Finn's 'stretchers:' departures from the (sometimes tedious) truth. The second idea is that the acquisition of factual knowledge is a trivial achievement – something like memorizing a list of factoids – which does not require a process as interesting as imaginative engagement with fiction. Taken together, these ideas suggest that the transmission of such knowledge is unlikely to illuminate the special significance we attribute to great works of fictional literature. Thus aestheticians look at other features of fiction in attempting to account for its cognitive significance: for instance, the capacity to encourage empathetic responses, develop

imaginative skills, improve counterfactual reasoning, or tell us ‘what it is like’ to be in a given situation.

I am skeptical of all these claims. I doubt that there is *any* value, cognitive or otherwise, special to all and only works of fiction. I am skeptical that we can even demarcate the class of ‘all and only works of fiction.’ When we consider works whose classification is difficult or controversial – such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Edmund Morris’s *Dutch* – drawing a sharp line between the ones located in the fiction aisle and the ones on the opposite wall seems a useless occupation. Surely it is part of the value of *War and Peace* that it provided, at the time it was written, the most accurate account of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia available. Determining the cognitive value – or, rather, values – of a work of fiction is not something that can be accomplished in advance of considering the particular work in question.

Thus I see no reason to neglect the capacity to convey factual information – specifically, propositional knowledge about real individuals and events – when assessing the value of particular works. The value of this capacity depends on the worth of the information itself. There is a genuine question about why we place so much value on knowing what has happened, both lately and in the past; but it is clear that we *do* value this knowledge. If this knowledge is valuable, and we acquire it from certain works of fiction, then those works possess an important kind of cognitive value.

In this paper I consider the value of learning about history from a particular work of fiction, Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984) with the aim of casting doubt on the claims mentioned above. I choose this text because its author, like Tolstoy, is explicit about his intention to provide an accurate account of the relevant historical period (Vidal 1993). Drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology, I argue that narrative devices used by Vidal can *enhance* our ability to learn and retain factual information, despite also increasing the possibility that we will form false beliefs; that the information thereby attained is nothing like a list of trivial factoids; and that acquiring propositional knowledge from fiction, far from being a process we can take for granted, constitutes a difficult achievement. The experimental results I discuss raise important questions in aesthetics and epistemology. Though I will not have the space to answer them here, I hope to convince you that these questions warrant further investigation.

In the next section I describe Vidal’s novelistic technique. I then provide a sketch of how we learn from texts, and use this model to examine the potential rewards and risks of acquiring beliefs from *Lincoln*. In the final section I turn to the broader theoretical questions posed by these results.

Let me emphasize that my focus on factual information is not meant to imply that this is the only sort of knowledge one can acquire from fiction. And of course there are *other* types of information that one can glean from more standard works of non-fiction that one could not pick up from *Lincoln*: for instance, knowledge of the particular sources used. Moreover, as David Davies and Ivan Gaskell have emphasized to me, many works of non-fiction provide a sense of the practice of history, the methodologies and problems that arise in trying to understand the past, which would be out of place in this novel. Though these are all important sorts of cognitive value, I focus solely on the more neglected topic of factual information.

## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN *LINCOLN*

In Vidal's novel, the story of Lincoln's presidency is told by a third-person omniscient narrator who has 'inside views' of what real people are thinking – though the 'omniscience' does not extend to Lincoln's own mental processes. This aspect of Vidal's narrative technique is most appropriately compared to that of Henry James. In both cases the authors reflect the story through 'centers of consciousness,' characters to whose thoughts and experiences we are privy; we learn about events from their perspectives while the narrator remains effaced. Except that, in the case of *Lincoln*, these characters are real. We get inside views, for example, of Mary Todd Lincoln, John Hay (Lincoln's secretary), Salmon P. Chase (Secretary of the Treasury), William Seward (Secretary of State), and David Herold (a conspirator in the assassination).

Here is a passage that occurs following the first mention of Ulysses S. Grant, after he led the Union's first victory in the war at Shiloh. James Garfield has just remarked to John Hay and Kate Chase (the Treasury Secretary's daughter) that General Pope is the Union's best general in the West:

"Better than Grant?" asked Hay, genuinely curious. He could not make up his mind which set of generals was worse – the West Pointers who had spent their careers making money in the railroad business or the politicians on horseback, looking for renown. Although Grant was a West Pointer, he had gone into the saddlery business, where he had attractively failed.

"He's a better all-round general than Grant. But Grant is best in the field. I know you disapprove, Miss Kate, of how he never lets up but that's the way it's done. The two sides lost more men at Shiloh

than were ever before lost in a single day of modern warfare. That was because Grant would not retreat, even though the rebels had the advantage.”

In Chase’s study, Pope was saying the opposite. “Grant is hopeless. When not drunk, he is in a sort of stupor. At Shiloh, he was surprised by the enemy. He was unprepared. He barely survived. He is no general. But then McClellan’s worse” (Vidal 1984: 346).

It takes a certain sophistication to recognize that the final sentence of the first paragraph continues Hay’s train of thought, because it employs free indirect discourse, a novelistic means of representing thoughts through third-person narration. Perhaps no other technique has been more closely associated with fiction than privileged access to the private thoughts of characters. Because the writer of a work of non-fiction could not possibly have such access to the minds of other people, histories and biographies standardly present the thoughts of real individuals as inferences from the evidence. And they provide information about their evidential sources. This is by contrast with Vidal’s narration, which provides the reader with fictional, seemingly *direct* access to the thoughts of certain characters.

*Lincoln* does more, though, than manipulate the points of view from which we learn about events; it also changes some known facts about how events unfolded. In different terms, Vidal distorts the *subject matter* of his narrative, that is, the real events and individuals he describes. Vidal invents some minor characters. He creates a history for one of the real conspirators in the assassination, David Herold, because very little is known about his early life. He also changes the chronology of a few events. On the other hand, when it comes to those parts of the narrative that directly concern Lincoln, Vidal claims to be as reliable as any traditional biographer. Lincoln is never even in the same room as the few invented characters, and no changes are made in the chronology of his activities. Similarly, we get information about Lincoln’s thoughts and perspectives only through quotations of his words and inferences from other evidence.

Although Vidal’s portrait of Lincoln has generated controversy, this is not because Vidal lacks evidence for his claims. In addition to his own extensive studies of primary and secondary sources, Vidal employed a researcher to correct any mistakes about ‘agreed-upon facts’ – the public information that is not in debate among historians (Vidal 1993: 675). He also consulted with Lincoln scholar David Herbert Donald, who, eleven years later, wrote an acclaimed biography of Lincoln. Vidal details his fictionalizations in the afterword to the novel, where he describes as “urgent” the question, “how much of *Lincoln* is generally thought to be true? How much made up?” and

states that he will provide “as straight an answer as the writer can give.” He goes on to say that all of the major historical figures are “reconstructed... from letters, journals, newspapers, diaries, etc.,” and that they “said and did pretty much what [he has] them saying and doing” (1984: 659). Of course, the above passage probably does not provide the exact words of Garfield and Pope; and a reader would have to know something about Vidal’s method to know that information about these conversations likely came from Hay’s and Chase’s diaries. Still, in several exchanges with critics, Vidal has brought such sources forward to defend the statements in the novel.

In what follows I assume that Vidal is as reliable as he claims to be, that is, that he is reliable with respect to everything he does not purposely fictionalize. What I have just said may not be enough to convince you that he is reliable. But if it turns out that he is not, this will be for reasons no different from those that make authors of standard non-fiction works unreliable. The assumption of reliability therefore allows us to concentrate specifically on the cognitive effects of the intended fictionalizations.

## LEARNING FROM A TEXT

To understand what effects Vidal’s narrative approach might have on our learning from *Lincoln*, it is useful to have a model of learning from a text. Think of this process as involving two stages. The first stage consists in comprehending the text; if you don’t understand what you’re reading, there’s no chance you will learn anything. Cognitive psychologists distinguish recall of the propositions in the text from genuine comprehension, which results in a mental representation of the situation the text is *about*, usually called a *situation model* (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983) or *mental model* (Johnson-Laird 1983). Readers who perform best on measures of comprehension are those who are most active in making inferences that integrate prior knowledge with incoming information, thus developing the most elaborated, coherent situation models (McNamara et al. 1996; Voss and Silfies 1996; Narvaez, van den Broek, and Ruiz 1999; Vidal-Abarca, Martinez, and Gilabert 2000). The second stage of learning from a text consists in the integration of new information in the situation model into long-term belief structures so that it can be accessed and applied in other contexts. In most cases readers *incorporate* only some elements of the situation model into their beliefs, while *compartmentalizing* others – that is, keeping these elements restricted to the situation model derived from the text (Potts and Peterson 1985; Potts, St. John, and Kirson 1989).

The important point for my purposes is that the way we store new information in memory at the second stage depends crucially on features of the

situation model we develop at the first stage, in comprehension. Learning is not simply the accumulation of true beliefs, the storing of a list of facts in a little black box in the mind. If it were, my computer would know much more than I do. Rather, learning requires the *integration* of new information with old, *organized* so that it can be applied in other contexts.

We can use the above-quoted passage from *Lincoln* to illustrate. At the most basic level, a reader must keep track of the different points of view in the passage, for instance the fact that the first paragraph represents Hay's thoughts, while Garfield is speaking in the second paragraph. Similarly, to understand the situation described by Garfield, a reader must infer the connection between being "best in the field" and never letting up, which is not made explicit. A more sophisticated level of comprehension requires applying information available earlier in the novel (and elsewhere): that the main problem the Union has faced is the unwillingness of its generals, notably George McClellan, to pursue serious battles. With that information in mind, a reader will understand why, according to Pope, McClellan is still "worse" than Grant. Finally, we should note that most readers of the novel would already know something about Grant. Such background knowledge will immediately be brought to the reader's mind at the first introduction of Grant into the novel, and will necessarily affect the way she processes information from the text. For instance, readers aware of Grant's later successes and eventual promotion to commander of the Union armies will have to reconcile this information with the varying opinions presented by characters in the novel. They will come to understand the ways in which Grant was viewed by his contemporaries, and will draw conclusions about which contemporaries were more reliable judges.

It turns out that readers who make more inferences in developing a mental representation at the first stage are more likely to incorporate elements of the situation model with other beliefs at the second (Potts, St. John, and Kirson 1989). And the better the situation model developed during reading, the more likely we will integrate information into our long-term beliefs in ways that make the information accessible in new contexts. This is because the situation model will already contain connections to the reader's other beliefs, which are then carried over into long-term memory. This process relies on features of both reader and text. A reader who already knows something about Grant, and who keeps in mind relevant information from preceding sections of the text, will engage in the sort of active inferential processing that facilitates learning and retention. By contrast, a reader who knew nothing about Grant prior to reading the text would not be able to engage in some of the inferential processes I have described. And had the text spelled out certain connections, the reader would not need to make certain

inferences herself and would therefore have been less likely to integrate the new information. I will argue that *Lincoln* possesses many characteristics that prompt the type of inferences that result in new information's being integrated with other beliefs in long-term memory.

To the extent that readers, in comprehending *Lincoln*, develop situation models that are accurate representations of the real world, this result is exactly what we should want. As we have seen, however, the text is not entirely true, and thus arises what I will call the *epistemic risk* of learning from the novel. For readers to avoid forming false beliefs, they must be selective about which elements of the situation model to incorporate and which to compartmentalize. In the next section I consider the comprehension stage, explaining how Vidal's narrative technique facilitates the construction of better situation models. In the following section I consider the attendant epistemic risks.

## COGNITIVE REWARDS

A growing body of research in psychology indicates that certain narrative devices often associated with fiction – though increasingly with non-fiction – improve readers' comprehension and retention of information. The obvious difference between *Lincoln* and standard biographies is the manipulation of the point of view from which we learn about events. *Lincoln* plunges us directly into the flow so that we 'see' the president in action: we learn about Lincoln through the eyes and minds of people close to him, rather than from Vidal's real retrospective point of view. It turns out that this shift in perspective generates numerous epistemic advantages, which I will briefly outline.

One advantage is that such eyewitness descriptions are more likely to be *concrete*, thereby generating more imagery; this in turn seems to significantly enhance memorability. Experiments in which abstract texts were revised to contain more concrete language measured a substantial increase in readers' recall performance (Sadoski, Goetz, and Rodriguez 2000). Getting the story from the point of view of particular characters also prompts vicarious experiences in the reader, creating more personal and emotional engagement, for instance through identification with particular characters (Wade 1992). Increasing personal engagement has a direct effect on text comprehension. The more involved a reader is, the more likely she is to engage in the active processing of information that fosters understanding and improves learning.

A related epistemic advantage of *Lincoln* depends on the *reduction of exposition* afforded by Vidal's technique. Conventional biographies are, as one researcher puts it, "narrative in structure" yet "expository in nature"



(Wade 1992: 260). Although biographies recount the events of a person's life, they interrupt the narrative to provide descriptions and background, explanations of causes and consequences, and arguments for interpretations of events. By contrast, Vidal does not "make magisterial judgments or quibble with others in the field" (Vidal 1993: 695). It turns out that narratives display an advantage over expositions in studies of reading comprehension. Expository texts, when they treat unfamiliar topics, prompt subjects to process information as so many separate items to be memorized; in other words, they evoke the behavior associated with cramming for an examination (Narvaez, van den Broek, and Ruíz 1999; Vidal-Abarca, Martínez, and Gilabert 2000). By contrast, narratives prompt readers to focus on the situation the text is about. Readers of *Lincoln* are able to arrive at conclusions about major historical events, not by reading an explanation of those events ('Lincoln did not care as much about slavery as about keeping the Union together'), but by interpreting human behavior (from Lincoln's actions, as witnessed by those close to him, they infer that he cared less about slavery than the Union). Because these readers will have made the inferences to causes and consequences themselves, they are more likely to remember the information and to put it to use in novel situations (McNamara et al. 1996). And when presented with brand new information in narrative form, they already possess knowledge structures that will help them organize that information (Seely and Long 1994).

Finally, Vidal's presentation of contrasting viewpoints encourages more effective processing of information. "Hay admired Lincoln, Chase hated him, Mary Todd loved him, and so on. Each sees him in a different way, under different circumstances" (Vidal 1993: 695). Given the multiplicity of conflicting perspectives on Lincoln, it is impossible *not* to try to solve the mystery of what makes him tick. So we put a great deal of cognitive effort into understanding this indecipherable individual, meaning that we will remember more than we would otherwise. Researchers investigating how to improve the teaching of history have found that learning from multiple sources leads to deeper comprehension. One reason, suggested by Keith Lehrer, is that having an aggregation of diverse information lends greater support to a conclusion than having only one source. But in addition, having to assess multiple sources promotes problem-solving activities, rather than passive reception (Britt et al. 1999). Thus Vidal enables us to evaluate several different viewpoints in arriving at our own conclusions. The passage above provides an excellent example of this feature: we are provided with three different perspectives on Grant – Hay's, Garfield's, and Pope's – and we must use our own background information and information from throughout the text to decide how to assess Grant's abilities.

To summarize: Vidal's narrative technique in *Lincoln* makes the text more interesting, prompts mental imagery, increases personal and emotional engagement in the story, reduces expository interruptions, and increases active inferential processing. The result is that the reader of *Lincoln* will have a kind of 'mental map' of Lincoln's presidency: how policies were formed, what effects they had, who was involved, and so forth. A person with this sort of representation knows more about that slice of history than someone who remembers a series of facts without having a sense of how they hang together.

It is worth pausing over the conclusion one can draw from these results: the use of techniques designed to make a work a better story – techniques typically associated with fiction – can actually *improve* a reader's capacity to acquire propositional knowledge about historical persons and events. If learning in this sense means integrating information with existing memory structures so that it is accessible in new contexts, then these narrative devices are cognitively valuable to the extent that they facilitate this process. And there is plenty of evidence that they do.

## EPISTEMIC RISKS

While I have claimed that the techniques used by Vidal enhance *Lincoln*'s value as a source of historical knowledge, these cognitive rewards are attended by certain risks. The techniques prompt readers to form better mental representations of Lincoln's presidency and to integrate these representations into their long-term beliefs; in so doing, however, these techniques increase the possibility that readers will form false beliefs. Thus arises the epistemic risk of learning from the novel.

As I have said, Vidal distorts some elements of his subject matter. And this is not just a contingent feature of the novel; Vidal's use of multiple perspectives obliges this type of fictionalization. For example, Vidal does not invent a history for David Herold out of an unmotivated desire to exercise his creativity. Rather, this aspect of the narrative is required by the objective of providing multiple points of view on Lincoln, including the perspective of those who hated the president enough to conspire in assassinating him. Not too much is known about the conspirators other than John Wilkes Booth, who was a famous actor. But Herold had two important features Booth lacked: he was present in Washington DC during the whole of Lincoln's presidency, so that we can get eyewitness accounts throughout that period; and he is not so well known, which means that readers are more likely to sympathize and thereby come to understand his point of view.

With respect to Vidal's use of privileged access, no reader is likely to believe, in reading *Lincoln*, that she is getting exact transcriptions of the moment-by-moment thoughts of particular real individuals, so there is little danger on this score. Even so, the narrative technique can lead to misunderstanding, as illustrated by Vidal's exchange with the historian Richard Current. Current argued in his review of the novel that Vidal had wrongly "asserted that Ulysses S. Grant 'had gone into the saddlery business where he had attractively failed,'" because, according to Current, "Grant had never gone into the saddlery, harness, or leather-goods business and therefore could not have failed at it. He was only an employee" (1988: 66). I am inclined to agree with Vidal's comment that "This is the sort of thing that gives mindless pedantry a bad name" (1993: 691).

But Vidal also replies to Current less flippantly. In addition to citing Grant's own writings, as any non-fiction writer defending his interpretation would do, Vidal argues that Current has misunderstood the way novels are written. He points out that the reference to Grant as a failure in the saddlery business is an "idle remark" by John Hay, not an assertion by the author (1993: 691). The potential for misunderstanding is obvious, partly because the people through whose eyes and minds Vidal narrates events necessarily have limited information (which is sometimes inaccurate), but also because not every reader is familiar with the relevant narrative devices.

The result is that the cognitive advantages of reading *Lincoln* more or less inevitably carry with them increased epistemic risks. But how likely is it that readers will succumb to these risks? Research into narrative persuasion gives us cause for concern. Sparing the (fascinating) details, the upshot of research in this domain is that readers are more likely to incorporate information that they do not hold up to scrutiny – where 'scrutiny' involves assessment of evidence and argument – and that they are more likely to process information in this way when engaging with narrative (Wheeler, Green, and Brock 1999; Green and Brock 2002; Slater 2002; Strange 2002). There are two obvious reasons: first, fictions "are not created to withstand critical scrutiny," given that they often contain poorly reasoned arguments and little evidence; and second, readers are unlikely to make the effort to scrutinize fictions since they "do not approach works of fiction concerned about being misled by their contents, or equipped with the knowledge that would be necessary to evaluate them" (Prentice and Gerrig 1999: 533). In fact, scrutiny goes down to the extent that the narratives are personally engaging, prompt imagery, and possess narrative structure (Slater 2002; Green and Brock 2002). But of course these are the same features of *Lincoln* that facilitate comprehension and retention of information. In other words, the cognitive rewards and risks are two sides of the same coin.

Yet readers of fiction do not believe everything they read, no matter how engaging the narrative. A number of experiments (cited in the previous paragraph) indicate that readers are likely to compartmentalize text contents when they believe the material to be made up or when the text contains explicit statements that the author lacks accurate information. Readers for whom the topic of a fiction is personally relevant, or who are high in 'need for cognition' (that is, they like to think), are also more likely to scrutinize fictional information. On the other hand, readers are more likely to incorporate information from fictions to the degree that it is applicable to the real world – for instance, general information about whales as opposed to specific information about Ahab.

What does all this tell us about how readers will incorporate or compartmentalize what they read in *Lincoln*? The subtitle is an explicit warning against believing everything, but the fact that the novel treats individuals and events familiar to most readers increases the potential applicability of the information to the real world. On the other hand, most readers are familiar with historical novels that change specific facts while remaining faithful to the broad outline of events. So readers might resist the incorporation of particular facts (e.g. that Lincoln regularly used a laxative called 'Blue Mass') while nonetheless incorporating more general features of their situation models (e.g. that Washington DC was a swamp during the early 1860s). This result should assuage the concerns of those who think readers should be especially careful in accepting what they read in works labeled 'fiction.' But it is not really a good result in this case: Lincoln did, in fact, use a laxative called 'Blue Mass.' Vidal is just as careful about specific details as about general claims, except where he purposely fictionalizes.

Even granting Vidal's overall accuracy, many will hesitate to agree that *Lincoln* is a good source of propositional knowledge. If readers approach this novel the same way they approach other novels – that is, without much scrutiny – they could be as likely to believe the false information in *Lincoln* as the true. And of course the various ways in which *Lincoln* enhances comprehension and encourages belief formation also apply to narratives that are much less accurate (a problem pointed out by Shaun Nichols). We would not say that *any* work utilizing the techniques we find in *Lincoln* is *ipso facto* a good source of factual information. If the improvements in text comprehension that I have outlined apply equally well to such fictions, how can they contribute to the acquisition of knowledge? Don't they show instead that there remains an inescapable tension between the purposes of fiction writing and the goal of telling the truth? I consider these questions in the final section.

## KNOWLEDGE AND VALUE

We saw that the techniques Vidal uses to make *Lincoln* a better story can facilitate the acquisition of historical knowledge. Yet the results of the previous section put this conclusion into doubt, because the techniques that improve comprehension and retention of information also make it more likely that readers will believe what is false. What should we infer from this combination of results?

We do not want to say that the potential for false beliefs by itself removes *Lincoln* from consideration as a source of factual knowledge. Just because our teachers, textbooks, eyes, and ears have sometimes given us false information, does not mean that beliefs acquired through these means fail to constitute knowledge. Perhaps, however, the increased chance of false beliefs is not the issue. Amie Thomasson suggested to me that the real objection to construing *Lincoln* as a good source of factual knowledge is that Vidal's method is 'sneaky:' rather than using *evidence* to persuade us, Vidal relies on narrative 'gimmicks' designed to generate such a vivid picture of the president in our minds that we cannot help but believe it. We already know that these techniques lower readers' scrutiny of textual information. But if we say that beliefs acquired without close inspection cannot constitute knowledge, we will have to conclude that we know very little. In particular, most of the beliefs we acquire through *testimony* would not count as knowledge, since we rarely check the evidence of our sources. Acquiring beliefs about Lincoln's presidency from Vidal's novel is acquiring beliefs on the basis of testimony, rather than by weighing evidence. So the question of whether this process yields knowledge depends on what it takes to learn through testimony.

I think that a reliabilist conception of knowledge is the most promising approach. On such an account, a belief counts as knowledge so long as it is true and was caused through a reliable process, that is, a process that ordinarily yields truths through non-coincidental mechanisms. Perception is normally a reliable process: if my belief that I see a chair in front of me is caused by my seeing a chair in front of me (and not, for example, by hallucinations or poor lighting conditions), the belief counts as knowledge. For a process to be reliable in this sense does not require that the believer know that it is; here I assume an externalist position on knowledge, according to which a knower need not be aware of the processes by which she knows. I will consider the internalist perspective below.

Testimony, like perception, is normally a reliable process of acquiring information. In any particular case, however, it might be unreliable – for instance if the person whose testimony you believe is (whether you know it

or not) ignorant or deceptive. It would not be uncommon to lump fictions in with such unreliable forms of testimony. They do not give us the whole truth; their authors seem free to mix fact and invention at will, without making the difference explicit. If a reader happens to pick up some true beliefs in the course of reading such a narrative, isn't this just a coincidence?

Note what would follow from an affirmative answer. If reliability is a condition for knowledge, and reading fictions is defined as an unreliable process, then there is no possibility of learning from these narratives. The implication is that readers should compartmentalize *everything* contained in the mental representations they develop in reading fiction. But a sweeping 'yes' answer would be a mistake. It would force us to deny that readers ever learn from fiction, whereas the fact that they learn from fiction ought to be a datum that our theories explain. And total compartmentalization would prevent readers from expanding their knowledge. This extreme isolation of fictional information is rarely, if ever, justified; even fairy tales provide some 'life lessons.'

There is obviously a vast difference between *Lincoln* and, say, "Hansel and Gretel." The difference is not that *Lincoln* happens to have real persons as characters; the cast that traipses through the pages of Doctorow's *Ragtime* are real, but their actions are pure invention. By contrast with *Ragtime*, "Hansel and Gretel," and most other fictions, *Lincoln* is designed to convey specific historical information. And it succeeds: readers of the novel can acquire numerous true beliefs about the facts of Lincoln's presidency. Whether these beliefs constitute knowledge depends, not on the reliability of learning from fiction *in general*, but on the reliability of learning from this work in particular.

Some authors of fictionalized texts have knowledge of their subject, while others do not; and authors are more likely to be reliable about some things rather than others. I have assumed that Vidal is accurate about everything he does not purposely fictionalize. This would make reading the novel a more reliable process of acquiring beliefs than reading most fictions and most non-fiction texts (think of all the documents on the internet, or most of the scientific treatises ever written). Even so, the bigger concern is that *readers* will not reliably discriminate fact from fiction. The empirical results discussed in the previous section tell us that no reader is likely to be either entirely reliable or entirely unreliable at distinguishing the true from the false, and that some readers are more reliable than others. A reader who was just as likely to believe Vidal as to believe Jules Verne would seem to arrive at true beliefs in a way too coincidental to count as knowledge.

This suggests that readers familiar with genre conventions or the techniques of certain authors – even if they cannot articulate the specific

conventions or techniques – are more likely to track true and false information accurately. Although testimony is normally reliable, a subtitle like *A Novel* certainly counts as a reason to increase scrutiny, especially with respect to particular facts. But as we have seen, a reader of *Lincoln* who compartmentalizes this type of information (e.g. Lincoln's use of Blue Mass) will thereby lose an opportunity to learn something. To realize this requires knowing something about Vidal's methods. The debate between Vidal and Current illustrates this point nicely. The novel provides information about the perspectives of Lincoln's contemporaries, and only indirectly about the historical facts. An awareness of narrative technique seems to be a prerequisite for learning from *Lincoln*. But this is not a feature unique to fiction. For instance, you have to know something about the conventions of ancient Roman histories to know that it was common for historians to make up speeches and battle descriptions (Nelson 1973: 5).

It is worth mentioning that the type of collateral information that increases a reader's reliability also provides a way to explain the acquisition of knowledge from fiction from an internalist perspective, that is, on the assumption that knowledge requires awareness of the justification of our beliefs. As Aaron Meskin has pointed out, this looks like a difficult task: if you ask me how I know something about Lincoln, answering 'I read it in a novel' doesn't seem like much justification. But although 'I read it in a novel' is not, in general, a good reason to believe that certain people said and did such-and-such, 'I read it in Gore Vidal's novel *Lincoln*' is, in fact, a good reason to believe that certain people said and did such-and-such. Of course, I know this only because I have done some additional research. If this concerns you, notice that 'I read it in a work of non-fiction' is not, in general, a good justification for any beliefs. One ought to have reasons to believe that the author is reliable, no matter the classification of the work. And we have such reasons for *Lincoln*.

If this is right, then we should conclude that – at least for readers who know something about Vidal's methods – *Lincoln* is an excellent source of historical knowledge. That it is a source of knowledge at all depends upon the variety of factors that determine the reliability of both author and reader. Research into how we engage with works like *Lincoln* suggests the need for an account of knowledge sensitive to differing degrees of reliability. And it shows that we can conclude nothing general about the possibility of acquiring propositional knowledge from works of fiction. The fact that we can learn about history from *Lincoln* tells us little about what we can learn from other works.

That *Lincoln* is an *excellent* source of knowledge, on the other hand, depends on the cognitive advantages afforded by Vidal's use of various

novelistic techniques. Consideration of *Lincoln* indicates that there is no *inherent* tension between the cognitive purpose of transmitting information and the aesthetic purpose of telling a good story. The tension is really between two different epistemic values: the value of sticking entirely to the facts, and the value of presenting the facts in a way that encourages better comprehension and long-term retention of information. The goal of telling a good story may be inconsistent with the first, but it contributes positively to the second. This is one way in which the aesthetic value of a work can enhance its cognitive value. I think the relationship goes both ways: given that one of the intentions of Vidal in writing *Lincoln* was to convey historical information, the novel's success at doing so should count toward its aesthetic value – but to defend this claim would require a different paper. For the present, I conclude by noting that in learning from fictions, we face the choice remarked by William James in “The Will to Believe:” between seeking truth and avoiding error. The right choice depends on the particular work in question. In the case of *Lincoln*, I suggest that the tradeoff is worth it.

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## Chapter 4

### FICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHT

Kathleen Stock

It is not unusual for a reader of a novel, especially that of the nineteenth century variety, to assume that, in reading, she is acquiring important insights into human beings. Yet philosophers have often found this assumption problematic. Most agree that fiction can be a source of psychological understanding, either explicitly, via psychological descriptions of characters, or implicitly, via the construction of psychological character portraits. However, there is disagreement about the importance of fiction's potential contribution in this area.

Some have suggested that the psychological information presented in a work of fiction could not reasonably strike a reader as true without the reader having come across it already in some other non-fictional context. Jerome Stolnitz represents this view when he writes: "Art, uniquely, never confirms its truths. If [on reading Jane Austen] we find that stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep attractive men and women apart, we find the evidence for this truth about the great world in the great world" (1992: 198; see also Diffey 1995: 210). Meanwhile, Noël Carroll suggests that, in the moral realm, which presumably includes the realm of moral psychology, "if... learning is a matter of the acquisition of interesting propositions heretofore unknown... then... there is no learning when it comes to the vast majority of narrative artworks" (1998: 141). In contrast, others have cast fiction as a potentially 'self-sufficient' source of psychological understanding (Robinson 1995; Conolly and Haydar 2001: 119).

As already intimated in Carroll's remark, a second prong of the attack has it that the psychological information provided by fiction cannot be genuinely *interesting*; that, at best, it is made up of 'truisms' (see also

Stolnitz 1992: 194). Others deny this, emphasizing the importance of the information acquired (Graham 1995; Robinson 1995; Conolly and Haydar 2001).

It seems obvious that fictions can be a 'self-sufficient' source of interesting psychological insights, and it seems curious that some writers have thought otherwise. One contributory factor here might be a certain picture of what it is to acquire psychological understanding, according to which such understanding is inductively acquired through extrapolation from evidence. On this view, where *p* is a proposition expressing some piece of psychological information, one comes to recognize *p* as true by encountering, either directly or via testimony, partial evidence for *p*, with the degree of confirmation for *p*, increasing, at least initially, in proportion to the number of occasions upon which such evidence is encountered.

Such a picture might appear to validate both the thought that a work of fiction cannot be 'self-sufficient' with respect to any psychological information disseminated, and that a fiction can provide knowledge only of uninteresting truisms. One who supposed that psychological information was acquired inductively, via direct or indirect exposure to relevant evidence, might be tempted to treat a psychological portrait or description delineated in a fiction as a kind of testimony – that is, as a form of second-hand evidence of the phenomenon picked out. If this were so, then the mere fact of its single appearance in a fiction could not be enough, on its own, to show the reader that it picked out a genuine phenomenon 'in real life;' the reader would have to be exposed to additional appearances before she could assume this with any reliability. (Analogously, neither would a single report of cold fusion legitimize the assumption that cold fusion was possible.) In fact, assuming that one treats a psychological description expressed in a work of fiction as testimony *about* the phenomenon in question, rather than as some kind of first-hand evidence *of* that phenomenon, additional complications about the reliability of the information presented seem to be raised, along the lines of those raised for testimony generally.

At this point, one might take one of two positions (or, like Stolnitz, take both). Perhaps motivated by worries about the reliability of the testimony of authors concerning psychological matters, one might deny that a psychological portrait or description in a fictional work could count as *any* kind of evidence for a psychological truth – authors, after all, are not generally trained as psychologists and are all too prone to imply contradictory statements (Stolnitz 1992: 196). Or, less counter-intuitively, one might acknowledge that fiction can be, and often is, a source of psychological understanding for a reader (Stolnitz 1992: 193), in which case, at least two things would follow. First, any information presented in a work of

fiction must be recognized as true based on evidence *already* encountered by the reader prior to reading that work; this entails that works of fiction cannot present, on their own, wholly new truths. Second, any information thus presented would tend not to be of great complexity or interest, since the more complex and specific a psychological portrait or description expressed in a fiction, the less likely it is that one has already found evidence for it elsewhere.

This view of psychological understanding as a kind of inductively acquired understanding appears to implicitly ground several authors' skepticism about fiction's potential for meaningful instruction. Stolnitz claims: "None of its truths are peculiar to art. All are proper to some extra-artistic sphere of the great world" (1992:198). Terry Diffey writes that "we cannot learn from a work... unless we already know that... the world is as the work shows it to be" (1995: 210). Meanwhile, Carroll's apparent presupposition that psychological understanding must be empirically acquired has been seized upon and criticized by certain other commentators (Conolly and Haydar 2001: 121).

I shall not attack the premises of such writers directly. Rather, I shall reject their conclusions, arguing that there are certain psychological depictions which, when presented in a fiction, in virtue of their very intelligibility to the reader, reveal their nature as possibilities of human experience, thereby bringing the reader to new psychological understanding of a propositional kind. In these cases, the reader does not need any prior (or subsequent) evidence of such phenomena in order to see that they are genuine possibilities for human life – states of mind actual human beings might have – and so the psychological understanding acquired by the reader through exposure to such portraits is not acquired inductively. This means that there is restriction neither on the novelty nor on the interest of the information potentially acquired in such a manner.

First, though, I describe some of the ways in which a fiction may make certain actions of its protagonist intelligible. In later sections, I show that these cases potentially provide psychological understanding, not just of fictional characters, but of real people as well.

## **FICTIONS AND THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF ACTIONS**

Uncontroversially, a fiction can make an action of a character intelligible. On what one might call a 'weak' or 'formal' conception of intelligibility, a fiction makes a given fictional action (or mental state) intelligible simply

by filling out aspects of the psychology of the fictional agent, showing how the action in question coherently relates, in terms of means and ends, to other aspects of her mental set. For instance, a fiction might make George's joining the circus weakly intelligible, by making it clear that he wants to become a lion-tamer, and that he believes joining the circus will enable him to do this. Perhaps it also reveals that he wants to become a lion-tamer in order to outdo a rival, that he believes becoming a lion-tamer will enable him to do this, and that he wants to outshine his rival in order to impress his beloved... and so on. A minimal requirement upon making a fictional action intelligible in this weak sense is to start by describing some goal of the fictional agent, and then to attribute to her a belief that the action in question will achieve, or contribute to achieving, the goal. The resulting description of a belief and an attitude will constitute the agent's reason for so acting (Davidson 1980a: 3–4). One might then provide a context for this reason, by showing how it fits with further goals she has and with her beliefs about how the action will achieve such goals.

There is an obvious sense in which fictions can do this. For instance, Nabokov's *Lolita* makes the kidnapping and drugging of a child formally intelligible by showing how those actions cohere with the protagonist's desire to seduce the child, and with his belief that kidnapping and drugging her is a means of doing so. Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* makes infanticide weakly intelligible by furnishing an account of the surrounding states of mind which might accompany such an act.

However, simply showing how a given fictional action or mental state coheres with other mental states need not on its own say anything very informative. Finding intelligible, in this weak sense, a fictional character's action A, in terms of some prior desire  $D_1$  to achieve a certain goal  $G_1$  – say, the act of procuring a saucer of mud because one desires it (the example is from Anscombe 1963) – might just be a matter of attributing to the character another desire  $D_2$  for some further goal  $G_2$  (say, the desire to rub mud into one's face), and a belief about how satisfaction of  $D_1$  is a means of satisfying  $D_2$ . For each new desire so posited, such (weak) intelligibility could be a matter of explaining *that desire* in terms of yet another desire, in much the same way. The positing of such further desires, along with relevant beliefs about the relationship between the relevant goals, could go on for some time without A being made intelligible to the reader in an interesting sense. To anticipate: it would be of no use merely to be told, for instance, that the character procures a saucer of mud with which to rub mud into her face, if one did not also understand *why* she might want to rub mud into her face. Additionally, to be told, say, that she wants to rub mud into her face because she wants her face to be the same color as her

wardrobe, would not help matters. Something else is needed, and it is not just the positing of some further desires and beliefs *per se*.

A distinction therefore should be drawn between weak or formal intelligibility and substantive intelligibility. A central way to make a given fictional action *substantively* intelligible is not simply to cite certain mental states which cohere with it, but also to show that the mental states with which it coheres are *themselves* substantively intelligible. I shall clarify this by focusing on two ways in which an author might show the mental states of a fictional character (and thereby any actions of hers motivated by such states) to be substantively intelligible.

First, take the case of desire. The citing of a desire is a central way for an author to rationalize a certain act of a fictional agent: she did A because she wanted G (and she believed that A was a means of obtaining G). But in order for this to work as an interesting rationalization, the desire itself has to be made substantively intelligible.

A central way in which a reader comes to find a fictional character's desire to achieve a certain goal substantively intelligible is via the fiction's making manifest its relation, ultimately, to a 'desirability characterization' (Anscombe 1963: 70–2); that is (or so I shall claim), to a goal which the reader judges as desirable, *ceteris paribus*. One understands, in this stronger sense, a character's desire D for goal  $G_1$ , if one sees that the character wants to achieve  $G_1$  in order, ultimately, to achieve  $G_n$ , where  $G_n$  is a goal one judges to be desirable, *ceteris paribus*.

Take again, for simplicity's sake, Anscombe's unusual case of the desire for a saucer of mud, itself made weakly intelligible by its connection to the agent's desire to rub mud into her face. Both of the desires cited here might become substantively intelligible to a reader R upon R's realizing that the character who desires this, does so in order *to improve the condition of her skin*. Such a realization would make the action substantively intelligible to R where R judged that, other things being equal, improving the condition of one's skin is a desirable thing to do. In contrast, to revert to the former example, the positing of the further goal *to make one's face the same color as one's wardrobe* would not make intelligible to R a character's wanting a saucer of mud in the same way, since normally R would have to struggle to see how such a desire could be connected, immediately or mediately, to any desirable end.

Fictions, then, can make an apparently unintelligible desire of a character comprehensible, not only by furnishing a coherent account of surrounding mental states and behavior, but, more interestingly, by showing that the desire falls under, or is grounded in a further desire which falls under, a desirability characterization. In *Lolita*, for instance, Humbert wants to seduce the child Lolita, and believes that kidnapping and drugging her is a

means to doing so. This desire, perhaps only formally intelligible to many when so baldly stated, is made substantively intelligible for the reader when the desire is related, either directly or indirectly, to some desirability characterization: perhaps, a desire to regain feelings of one's sexual awakening; or a desire for sexual possession of a person with at least some of *Lolita's* physical characteristics (her "glowing" skin, "the silky shimmer of her temples shading into bright, brown, hair" (Nabokov 1995: 41) and other physical characteristics associated with beauty and health are constantly emphasized). Making this desire intelligible renders Humbert's subsequent behavior, motivated by this desire, also intelligible. (The fact that *Lolita* as a whole alternately invites and evades such interpretations is consistent with my eventual claim that the work makes intelligible certain reasons for acting as Humbert does, whether or not it is true in the fiction that these are *Humbert's* reasons for so acting).

Of course, for many mundane cases, there is no need for a fiction to explicitly reveal the desirability characterization of a given action, since the reader will readily anticipate that characterization. I am concerned, rather, with the sort of fictional action which would, on a condensed characterization, be unintelligible to most readers, without the fiction's (often prolonged and perhaps implicit) articulation of the desirability characterization under which the action falls.

Some clarifications: where a desire is made substantively intelligible to reader R by its ultimate relation to a goal which R judges to be desirable, R need not be concerned to pursue this goal herself. This is part of the point of the *ceteris paribus* clause; it indicates the possibility that R might have other goals which she deems more valuable than the goal cited in explanation. In this case, the fact that she herself does not pursue that goal as an end does not show that she does not value it.

Secondly, that a desire D of a character becomes substantively intelligible to R by its being related, ultimately, to a goal which the character judges to be desirable, is consistent with R's finding the goals to which D is more immediately related positively undesirable, even reprehensible. This is shown by the *Lolita* case, but the point can be made more clearly in relation to a simpler example. Say that a fictional character on a train beats up a fellow passenger in order *to spread blood all over the carriage* (I owe this example to Peter Goldie). Perhaps we can find this substantively intelligible if it is related to the further goal of *making a pleasing pattern*, an end which we understand, if not as enormously important, then at least as having some value, *ceteris paribus*. In this sense, we can come to understand the action. But this is not to say, of course, that we think it a good thing to spread blood all over the carriage. For, quite properly, we also judge that

any value the action would accrue, when understood as the act of making a pleasing pattern, is outweighed or even negated by other consequences of the action when it is fully described. (In another sort of case, one might acknowledge the desirability of a goal towards which an action is ultimately aimed, thereby acknowledging the action as substantively intelligible, while judging that the action is nonetheless a bad thing, because one judges that it is not in fact likely to achieve the goal in question.)

Acknowledging the former sort of case means that there may yet be a sense in which a substantively intelligible desire of a character, in the sense I have described, is nonetheless unintelligible: namely, insofar as the reader cannot understand the character's prioritization of the desire over other considerations, or cannot understand how the value for the character of achieving a given desire is not outweighed or negated by other consequences. Though there is not the space to explore the matter here, it seems that a fiction may also make a desire, or action motivated by such a desire, intelligible in this richer sense. In this paper, however, I shall largely focus on substantive intelligibility in the more limited sense just delineated (though I shall briefly return to the richer sense).

Finally, I claim only that being related to a desirability characterization is a *sufficient* condition for the substantive intelligibility of a desire, not that it is a necessary one. This means my position is untroubled by cases where fictional actions, although apparently substantively intelligible from a third-person perspective, are yet genuinely pursued *sub specie mali* – such as, perhaps, the activities of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, whose dictum is “Evil, be though my good” (see Anscombe 1963: 75; Velleman 1992: 18; Dancy 1993: 6). For, if we must accept such cases at face value, it can be allowed that they are substantively intelligible in a way different from the cases with which I am concerned. Of course, the rejoinder may be that the substantive intelligibility of an action generally has *nothing* to do with any motivating desire being connected to a desirability characterization. I fail to see, however, how such a claim could be maintained, both when confronted by the intuitive force of the sorts of literary cases already discussed (that is, cases where an otherwise incomprehensible fictional action is made intelligible by its perceived connection to recognizable values), and, perhaps more centrally, when confronted by the characteristic way in which ordinary people try to make sense of others (real or fictional) by positing possible motivations for their acts in terms of goals readily understood as desirable. (For instance: ‘why do you think she hit him?’ ‘well, perhaps she wanted to let off steam.’)

Thus far, I may have given the impression that, at least for some cases, *all* there is to making a given action of a fictional character substantively



intelligible is to show that the action is related, mediately or immediately, to a desire for an end which falls under a desirability characterization. This is misleading, insofar as, in such cases, it also must be possible to see how that particular action could be counted as a means of achieving the end in question. In other words, the belief of the character that the action in question will achieve, or contribute to achieving, the relevant goal picked out by her desire, must be shown to be intelligible too.

Normally, the fit between a character's desired end and any action supposed to be motivated by it need not be made explicit, since it is obvious how one relates to the other. Nonetheless, that there *must* be such a fit is not a given; it is conceivable that in some work of fiction (probably, a bad one), a character might be described as doing one thing in order to achieve another thing, where it is unclear to the reader how the former could possibly be counted by the character as a means of achieving the latter (Anscombe 1963: 35–6). For a reader to find intelligible a fictional agent's belief B that an action A is a means of achieving some goal G, she must be brought to understand what features A has, such that they might be conceived of by the agent as contributing to or consisting in achievement of G. It does *not* require the reader to believe that an action such as A *is* a means of achieving G; there has to be room for the reader to judge the fictional agent's reasoning as faulty without the agent's belief thereby collapsing into unintelligibility. However, if the reader does judge B to be false, so that she judges A is not actually a means of achieving G, then in order for B to count as intelligible, the reader has to be able to see how the agent might have (mistakenly) arrived at B, given the agent's epistemic situation. For instance, in *Madame Bovary*, when Charles Bovary conceives of the operation on lame Hippolyte as a means of enhancing his prestige and so also Emma's love for him, the prescient reader knows that this is impossible; notwithstanding, she is not required to believe that the operation will be such a means, but only to be able to see how Charles could think that it might be.

This latter observation allows us to shed some further light on what I earlier called 'weak intelligibility.' For it turns out that making an action only weakly intelligible is identical to positing a motive for an agent's action in terms of a desire or other pro-attitude towards some eventual end, where one can see how the agent might reasonably believe the action is a means to that end, but cannot understand what might be valuable about the end in question. In other words, the fit between the action and the posited desire is intelligible, but the desire itself does not fall under any identifiable desirability characterization.

So far I have been concerned with the intelligibility of desires. I now wish to turn, albeit briefly, to another sort of mental act with obvious relevance



to the rationalization of action: moral judgment. As it is with a desire, a central way of making a fictional character's moral judgment (and thereby any actions motivated by that judgment) substantively intelligible is to show that such a judgment falls under a desirability characterization which gives it a point in relation to recognizable human interests. (In such cases, it is also important, as before, to make it apparent how the action in question could count as a means of achieving the desirable end picked out by the moral judgment, a point I shall take for granted in what follows).

For instance, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* makes intelligible a mother's murder of her child, who is otherwise facing slavery, by allowing the reader to conceive of the act as issuing from an intelligible moral imperative, falling under a desirability characterization – namely, “to protect every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful” (Morrison 1987: 163; see also Carroll 1998: 155). Under this description the moral judgement implicit in the heroine's action has a manifest relationship to what is recognizably worthwhile in human life, and is substantively intelligible as such. Other moral judgments issuing in action may need their point unveiled more explicitly: in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, for instance, Julia Flyte gives up her beloved Charles Ryder due to a growing awareness of the demands of her Catholic faith, and the recognition that she cannot live in sin with him, since she cannot bring herself to “set up a rival good to God's” (Waugh 1962: 324). The reader can only grasp the point of the moral imperative behind this act of self-sacrifice once she has grasped how Julia's sense of her own integrity centers on a truce with God that represents both reparation for past impieties and solidarity with her devout family, especially in light of the emotional impact of her formerly recalcitrant father's deathbed conversion. That this is so is made clear (though not explicit) in the record of Julia's final conversation with Charles.

The claim I endorse here reflects something of Philippa Foot's point that the action of “clasping the hands three times in an hour” could not be intelligibly thought of as a morally good action unless a ‘special background’ were built into the thought experiment which revealed its point relative to some aspect of human flourishing (1967: 92). In other words, a moral concept does not attach meaningfully to an action or situation simply in virtue of its employer's feeling some capricious sentiment of approval or disapproval towards that action or situation, which on another occasion she equally well might have withdrawn. Rather, its application has to be recognizably keyed to the promotion (in the case of ‘positive’ moral concepts) or the undermining (in the case of ‘negative’ moral concepts) of recognizable human interests. (Foot's insistence that moral concepts are keyed to shared human interests is endorsed by those of otherwise very different views on the

nature of moral claims: cognitivists like McDowell 1994: 83–4 and non-cognitivists like Blackburn 1984: 197.) This being the case, one instructive role for literature to play is that of showing how an apparently idiosyncratic application of a moral concept in a character's judgment of a situation can nevertheless be, in that particular fictional context, substantively intelligible to the reader.

Recall that to find a moral judgment intelligible in virtue of its connection to some ultimate goal one judges desirable is not necessarily to endorse the judgement itself. One can see why *Beloved*'s Sethe thinks it is right to kill her child, because one sees that her intended end is valuable, without necessarily agreeing that it *is* right that she killed her child. For instance, one may demur on the grounds that her action is not in fact a means of achieving that end, or on the grounds that other ends, whose achievement her action precludes, are in fact more valuable. For this reason, I reject the suggestion that, where a fiction makes a given moral response (substantively) intelligible, it thereby involves the reader temporarily 'entertaining' in imagination that attitude or response. (For example, Matthew Kieran interprets the reader's finding the protagonists of *Brideshead Revisited* intelligible as a matter of "entertaining the moral perspective of Catholicism" – Kieran 2001: 32.) To find substantively intelligible a moral judgement requires only that one be brought to 'see the point' of the judgement; to see it as related ultimately to a goal one judges, other things being equal, as desirable (as my discussion of the *Brideshead* case shows). This is not the same as temporarily entertaining or endorsing the judgement oneself. To find Julia Flyte substantively intelligible, the reader does not have to think or imagine, even temporarily (assuming that this is possible), that Julia is *right* to leave Charles, or that living with Charles *would actually* constitute "setting up a rival good to God's." One only has to see how *she* might come to think that, and to see what, from her perspective, might appear valuable about it as such. This, as my argument suggests, is a matter of recognizing the structure of her mental states and behavior, both as constituting a largely coherent pattern, and as having a recognizable point, relative to her epistemic position, even if one simultaneously rejects elements of that epistemic position as false or wrong.

One might object that to find Julia Flyte *wholly* intelligible (not just in the sense that one understands her action in the light of some goal judged desirable, *ceteris paribus*, but also in the richer sense, acknowledged earlier, that one understands how she could prioritize that goal over others also judged desirable) one must indeed be able to imaginatively adopt her evaluative perspective, if only temporarily. It seems to me, however, that in order to find a character's behavior intelligible in this richer sense, one is required, not to *imaginatively* adopt her evaluative perspective, but rather to

*actually* adopt her evaluative perspective, that is, to be brought to see that whatever goal is in question *is* more desirable than others the character has. This, unlike imagining, is not a temporary state. In fact, it is not clear to me what 'imaginatively adopting an evaluative perspective' amounts to, if it does not involve actually adopting the evaluative perspective of a fictional character. However, I do not have the space to pursue this matter here.

Here then are two ways in which aspects of a character's mental states, and hence any actions motivated by those states, may be made substantively intelligible to a reader. Of course, these are not the only ways a fictional action may be made intelligible. An action might be made substantively intelligible in terms of some prior emotional response, for instance. (For a detailed elaboration of what might be involved, see Goldie 2000.)

The rationalizations under discussion need not be detailed explicitly. Usually, and certainly in the most interesting cases, the reader must infer the mediate source of a character's motivation, and its perceived value, under the guidance of what *is* made explicit in the fiction. An implicit rationalization may be countered by pronouncements of the fictional agent herself; just as in life, it is possible for an agent to be self-deceived about her motivation while her behavior betrays it to others. After all, in order for a reader to be brought to understand a fictional agent's motives, it is not required that the agent herself be depicted as aware of those motives.

It is also important to reiterate that a reader may understand a character's reasons for doing A in the sense in which I am interested without necessarily judging that the character has good reason to do A. I have deliberately focussed on examples where this is the case: for instance, one need not judge that there are good reasons for Humbert to kidnap Lolita or for Sethe to murder her children in order to judge such actions substantively (and not merely formally) intelligible. In such cases, one typically rejects either the attitudes of the agent which prompt the action in question, as corrupt, ill-disciplined, disproportionate, or otherwise inappropriate, despite their traceable relation to some goal the reader judges as good, other things being equal, or one rejects as false the agent's beliefs that her actions are a reliable means to achieve her ultimate ends. Indeed, often the author deliberately encourages such rejection. For instance, in *Lolita*, Humbert's attempts at justifying his treatment of Lolita are undercut by means of casual (from Humbert's perspective) yet revealing (from the reader's perspective) remarks he makes about her: her manifest boredom, her bouts of weeping, and so on. Of course, a work of fiction can lead the reader to see the motivating reasons of a character as good ones. Yet it is one of the great functions of fiction, and especially of the novel, to reveal how a character's perspective on the world may come apart from what (fictionally) is the

case; that is, to demonstrate that what the fictional agent ultimately holds valuable, though perhaps valuable *ceteris paribus*, should not be pursued in the particular context in which it is being considered.

## FICTIONAL REASONS AND ‘REAL LIFE’ UNDERSTANDING

One might wonder what any of this has to do with understanding of real life cases. After all, one might protest, fictions are about fictional entities, not real ones. How can a work about fictional characters and events have implications for how we might interpret real people?

Behind this worry lies the picture alluded to above in my introduction: that psychological understanding is acquired inductively. However, this is the wrong way to look at things, at least with respect to the substantive intelligibility of the sort of cases under discussion.

I have argued that a fiction may make a character’s action substantively intelligible by (1) establishing a connection between the action in question and a desire/moral judgment of the character’s which falls, immediately or mediately, under a desirability characterization; and (2) further establishing the reasonableness of the character’s belief that the action in question counts as contributing to the goal invoked in the desirability characterization cited in (1).

The successful execution of (1) forces the reader to acknowledge that the action in question is motivated in the light of some worthwhile or desirable goal, *ceteris paribus*. Now, one could not acknowledge that some goal G was a worthwhile one for humans to pursue, other things being equal, yet at the same time maintain that no human being ever could be motivated to pursue G. In other words, in acknowledging that a goal is a worthwhile one for humans to pursue, *ceteris paribus*, one *just is* acknowledging that some actual human being might be motivated to pursue it.

Meanwhile, the successful execution of (2) tells us that the character could believe (though perhaps falsely) that the action in question counts as contributing to the goal invoked in (1). Now, where p is any proposition, if it is reasonable for a fictional character in a given context to believe that p, then it would be reasonable for anyone in the same context, relevantly specified, to believe that p, whether that person is *real or fictional*. Another way of putting this is that whether the person concerned is real or fictional is not, on its own, relevant to what counts as reasonable for such a person to believe in a given context. What *is* relevant is the rest of the person’s mental states at the time (or, in the fictional case, what other mental states

the person is fictionally depicted as having): her beliefs, desires, intentions, hopes, fears, and so on. This reflects a point familiar from the work of Donald Davidson: one's judgment that it is reasonable for a given agent to have a belief depends on one's also being able to attribute to her a whole network of other intentional states consistent with that belief (1980*b*: 221). To be capable of thinking of another as having propositional attitudes at all presupposes that her intentional mental states largely cohere (Davidson 1985: 245). If this is right, and if we assume that thinking of fictional characters involves thinking of them as having propositional attitudes (as it does when thinking of real people), then our ability to think of them as having propositional attitudes depends on our interpretations of them being governed by the same standards which govern our interpretations of rational agents in general. These standards apply to real and hypothetical or fictional agents alike.

So successful execution of (2) tells us, in effect, that some actual (rational) human being could believe the action in question counts as contributing to the goal invoked in (1). Thus, the successful execution of (1) and (2) together, insofar as it amounts to showing the substantive intelligibility of a given action in terms of certain motivation(s), provides a demonstration that it is possible for someone (a real person, not just a fictional character) to be motivated to act in just this way. This, I suggest, brings us genuine psychological understanding of a potentially new and important kind.

An instructive contrast may be made with what I earlier called 'weak intelligibility.' Recall the example of a character desiring a saucer of mud, with which to rub mud in her face in order to make her face the same color as the wardrobe. Assuming this is weakly but not substantively intelligible as a motivation (insofar as it does not readily fall under any desirability characterization), simply seeing that these mental states cohere, in that one action obviously counts as a means to the next, does not thereby bring with it any knowledge about the possibility of their combination within some real human being. Until we can see why someone might want to make her face the same color as a wardrobe, and not just 'why' in the sense of some further, equally incomprehensible reason being posited (e.g. that 'she wanted to look like a tree'), but 'why' in the sense of it being shown why *this* might count as a desirable thing to do, we are none the wiser as to whether some real person might actually be motivated in this way. In contrast, a judgment that a given fictional action is substantively intelligible by virtue of its connection to some desire or moral judgment that is intelligibly linked to some further desirable end, brings with it the knowledge that this is a possible way for real human beings to be motivated. To read about *Beloved*'s Sethe or *Lolita*'s Humbert and to understand each

of them is to know that some real human being could be motivated to act as each, fictionally, acts.

This knowledge is not acquired by induction – that is, we do not need to find at least one other instance of someone who is motivated as Humbert is ‘in the great world’ before we can assent to the possibility of this combination of desire and action. The knowledge is acquired just by our finding the action in question substantively intelligible. The substantive intelligibility of a given action does not at all count as *partial* evidence that some agent could act in that way; rather, it establishes this conclusively. Hence it is not true that “art never confirms its truths” (Stolnitz 1992: 196). We have found confirmation of the observation, made against Carroll, that “our beliefs about moral psychology can be refined and changed in abstraction from knowledge of brute empirical facts” (Conolly and Haydar 2001: 121). Fiction is then potentially a ‘self-sufficient’ source of psychological understanding; and so there is no reason to deny either that such understanding can be substantially new to the reader or that it can be genuinely interesting and complex.

Earlier I admitted that it is possible for a reader to be brought to see a given goal as desirable *ceteris paribus* whilst continuing to find unintelligible a character’s prioritization of that goal over other goals, and her indifference to the (from the reader’s perspective) undesirability of the goal’s consequences. Does this threaten my claim that fiction can provide conclusive knowledge of psychological possibilities? I don’t think so. Even in those cases where a goal is shown to be desirable yet unintelligible, insofar as it is prioritized by a character over other apparently more valuable goals, something can be learnt, namely, that the goal can be intelligibly pursued at all. This is so even though it may still be unclear how the goal can be intelligibly pursued in the precise context in which the character pursues it.

It is a consequence of my view that certain works of fiction are on a par with diaries or autobiographies with respect to what they can reveal to the reader about possible motives for action. Obviously, diaries and fictional works differ in that only the former can provide information about the motives upon which agents *have* acted. Here I suppose one might insist that information about possible motives for acting is uninteresting, unless it is *also* information about some historical agent’s actual motives, as is found in diaries. Stolnitz intimates as much when he criticizes fiction for not being able to show that a given reason, explored in a fiction, could be ‘the primary’ or ‘inevitable’ cause of a real action (1992: 195). However, it is not clear why we should accept this bias towards the actual. Whether a given rationalization is of a fictional action or one that has actually occurred seems irrelevant to whether we find it illuminating or not. Accounts of the

purported motives of real agents can be profoundly unilluminating: consider the *prima facie* unintelligibility of a wife-beater's account of his activities, who claims that he acts thus 'because he loves her.' Meanwhile, although the discovery that *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a fiction (as is sometimes suggested) might lessen the power of the book in certain ways, it seems obvious that the force of the lessons one has learned, from that work about what was *possible* for a adolescent growing up in Holland under the Nazis – how she might think, feel, desire, and act in such a situation – would not be undermined.

Alternatively, one might accept that fiction can provide us with psychological insights in the form of knowledge of possible motives for action, yet question the value of these insights on the following grounds. One could agree it is *possible* that someone might be motivated to kill a child in the light of such motives as Sethe has; nevertheless, given the specificity of Sethe's epistemic situation (including references to the background slavery, her specific perception of what she has suffered in the past, her beliefs about the supernatural, and so on), it is highly unlikely that any person would be, *in actuality*, so motivated. This is reminiscent of one horn of a dilemma intimated by Stolnitz: either the psychological portraits offered by fictions are so detailed in their specifications of fictional characters and events that they cannot be applied to the 'real world;' or they are shorn of such elements, in which case we are left only with truisms (1992: 193–4).

We can reject the first horn of this dilemma, however. I have insisted that often part of what it is to explain an otherwise unintelligible fictional action is to redescribe it so as to give it a place in relation to a pattern of attitudes and beliefs which thereby reveal it as related to the pursuit of a goal which the reader judges, all things being equal, as desirable. For this to be possible, the action and the attitudes which motivate that action, no matter how specifically described, must also be describable in more general terms. Whether a given fictional action is judged to have a recognizable point will depend, not on features of the situation described at the most specific or particular level, but on whether that action possesses more general, abstract features repeatable elsewhere. For instance, a reader of *Beloved* can understand Sethe's murder of her child only if that reader sees the murder as motivated by a desire to save, not just those children *full stop*, but those children because they are to Sethe what is "precious and fine and beautiful" (Morrison 1987: 163). These are characteristics which might (though not, perhaps, for Sethe) be true of other people in other circumstances.

Additionally, as we have seen, an action is made intelligible by showing how the agent's belief that the action will fulfill some goal of hers is

itself intelligible; that is, by showing what features of the action might be seen by the agent as contributing to, or consisting in achievement of, the goal in question. For this, too, the action must be describable in terms of relatively general features relevant not only to this situation in particular, but elsewhere.

No psychological information conveyed by a work of fiction is so indelibly tied to the context of the fiction that it cannot be made potentially relevant to real human beings. Therefore, worries of the sort voiced by Stolnitz are unfounded.

Finally, one might object that any knowledge acquired in this way from fictions is not *propositional* knowledge, strictly speaking, and so does not falsify the claims of those who argue that fiction cannot give us psychological insight *of a propositional sort*. I am not sure what this objection might rest on, other than a prejudice that the proper objects of propositional knowledge are confined to only those propositions which can be easily or briefly conveyed or assimilated. Here, I do not think we should overstate the requirements on what counts as propositional knowledge. A piece of propositional knowledge can take the form of a collection of many propositions, including propositions of extremely complex form and/or content. This being so, there seems to be no impediment to analyzing, as propositional in form, psychological information about the connections between a given act and the possible motivations behind it – information that one can clearly acquire from reading fiction. Granted, the kind of psychological understanding of the possibilities of human mental life one gains through reading fiction is not aphoristic in form, and can take much time and effort to extract from a given fiction, but this does not entail that it is not propositional. It means only that its characterization can be very complicated. That is, I suggest, as we would wish.

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## Chapter 5

### ART AND MODAL KNOWLEDGE

Dustin Stokes

It has been argued that art cannot give us propositional knowledge. Alternatively, it has been proposed that any knowledge acquired via art is cognitively trivial. Finally, assuming the first two challenges can be met, it has been argued that, while art may provide us with propositional knowledge, it does not do so in any special or effective way. In other words, any knowledge obtained via art can be obtained elsewhere, and more efficiently and reliably to boot (Stolnitz 1992; see also Wilson 1983; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). Thus we have:

(K) the knowledge challenge: art cannot provide propositional knowledge.

(T) the triviality challenge: even if art can provide propositional knowledge (i.e. even if (K) is false), any knowledge so provided is cognitively trivial.

(P) the proficiency challenge: even if art can provide non-trivial propositional knowledge (i.e. even if both (K) and (T) are false), it does so via means which are cognitively or epistemically inferior.

Conjoining (K) through (P) presents us with a strongly non-cognitivist position – a rejection of the view that art is the kind of thing that can have significant cognitive value. Call this position *the skeptical position*.

The skeptical position can and should be rejected. Art provides us with non-trivial propositional knowledge. Art enables modal knowledge, in particular, knowledge of or about possibility. The argument for this claim will involve three steps corresponding to the above three skeptical claims. First, we reliably form beliefs about modal truths based upon our experiences

with art; as a result, the knowledge challenge is rejected. This claim will require considerable discussion of the prospects for modal knowledge. Second, it is argued that such knowledge is non-trivial: knowledge of possibility has legitimate cognitive value. The triviality challenge is thus rejected. Finally, the proficiency challenge is also rejected. I argue that art is especially adept at providing us with knowledge of modal truths. Novels, films, theater productions, and paintings represent counterfactual possibilities, the experience of which leads to the acquisition of modal knowledge.

## MODAL EPISTEMOLOGY

A number of important and difficult questions emerge from the debates surrounding modal epistemology. We will focus on just two. First, what can be said about modal truth? What, if anything, would make a proposition of the form, 'it is (im)possible that p' true? Second, how could a belief with content that is relevantly similar to the aforementioned proposition be justified? That is, are the mechanisms responsible for our modal beliefs reliable (or truth tracking)? Providing answers to either of these questions, let alone both, is no easy task. Nevertheless, if modal knowledge has any epistemic legitimacy, both questions must be given some positive answer. Proposals about modal knowledge from art will stand or fall with accomplishing this task. I am thus obligated to provide a modal epistemology, or at least an answer to the truth-question and to the justification-question with respect to modal belief. At best, I meet this obligation half way, offering a sketch of how modal beliefs might be reliably formed and of what would render such beliefs true. This may be a good start, but a sketch is, after all, just a sketch.

### *Types of Modality and Types of Modal Knowledge*

The two questions are made more tractable by first distinguishing types of modalities and types of modal knowledge. Following Kripke (1980), we can distinguish *epistemic* from *non-epistemic modality*. Epistemic modalities are relativized to some epistemic position. For all I know, it could be ten degrees Celsius in Victoria right now, the governor of Kansas might be a Democrat, and the White Sox might have only one left-hander on their pitching staff; these are possibilities from *my* epistemic perspective. Non-epistemic possibilities are not so relativized. We may also distinguish *nomological modality* from *non-nomological modality*. Some proposition p is nomologically possible or necessary relative to natural laws as current science posits them. Philosophers appeal to a variety of

other modalities – *conceptual*, *logical*, *metaphysical* – that are not bound to such laws. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne offer the following example: “it is possible in none of these senses that something is both red and not red, logically but not metaphysically possible that something is both red and non-extended, metaphysically but not physically possible that something travel faster than the speed of light, and possible in all three senses that something travel faster than the space shuttle” (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002: 5; see also Chalmers 2002: 159–71). As should be clear, teasing apart modalities is tricky business. But this isn’t a trick we need pull off for present purposes. We need only make the two distinctions discussed above, settling on a modality that is non-epistemic and non-nomological. As is standard in these discussions, this notion of possibility involves an appeal to talk of possible worlds; call it – again, following the standard formulation – *metaphysical possibility*. It is *metaphysically* possible that p if there is some possible world where p obtains or where p is true.

Think of modal knowledge as dividing into three types. (It is convenient to speak of these as types of *knowledge*. However, since we haven’t yet modeled modal knowledge, one might prefer to think of what follows as types of *purported* modal knowledge or, weaker still, types of modal beliefs.) Anything that is actual is necessarily possible. We thus have, for lack of a better term, *actual modal knowledge*, which consists in deriving possibility from actuality. Necessarily, any proposition that is actually true is possibly true. My dog, Gatsby, is actually napping on my bed, so it is possible that he is napping on my bed. Barring skeptical worries of the peskiest sort, if I can know the first, then I can know the second. So in this way, there are many modal truths to be known. But actual modal knowledge seems to get modal truths on the cheap and, moreover, the truths in question aren’t the ones that metaphysicians and epistemologists worry themselves over. The possibilities that do interest such parties, and that interest us for present purposes, are those which do not strictly derive from actuality – what are often called *counteractual* possibilities. So if the actual state of affairs is one where Gatsby naps on my bed at t, is some other counteractual state of affairs possible, one where Gatsby, at t, chases his tail, or surreptitiously eats a box of Twinkies, or writes a paper on doggy modality? How do we know whether these are real possibilities and thus whether the corresponding modal statements are true?

A number of philosophers working on modality have identified analogies between modal belief or judgment and perceptual belief or judgment. Just as features of our environment strike us as basically true or obviously the case, there are basic modal truths that have a similar intuitive knowability-status (Yablo 1993: 3–7; van Inwagen 1998: 70; Bealer 2002: 73–5). So, just as

propositions like ‘there is a tree before me,’ ‘I have two hands,’ and ‘this apple is red’ are basic truths about the world around us, propositions such as ‘I might have had salmon instead of tuna for lunch,’ ‘it might have rained for five minutes longer than it did,’ and ‘the Yankees could have lost game seven’ are also basic truths. These are facts about how the world could have turned out. Just as we can make judgments about the external world, we can make judgments about these basic modal facts. Such judgments are, as Van Inwagen puts it, *non-inferential*, requiring no conscious exercise of reason. Rather, we *just see* things in the world and we *just see* certain counterfactual possibilities: I *just see* that there is a tree before me and I *just see* that the Yankees could have lost. Both judgments plausibly amount to knowledge. Just as we can have basic perceptual knowledge, we can have what we will call *basic* modal knowledge. We get the first through vision or some other sense modality and the second through modal intuition. This is perhaps a Moorean fact about us and our relation to the world.

But perceptual judgments are notoriously fallible, the skeptic will challenge. Since you have had false beliefs about the world in the past or since there is always a possibility that things are not as they appear, how can you make reasonable claim to perceptual knowledge? In like manner, the skeptic will press, modal judgments are fallible, and so modal knowledge is in at least as bad a position as perceptual knowledge. (Notice, however, that much of the skeptic’s challenge presupposes that there are modal facts, that, for example, it is possible the ‘barn’ before you is not after all a barn, but a barn façade. One can see the obvious tension between perceptual skepticism and modal skepticism: the perceptual skeptic needs some modal beliefs or knowledge to get his attack off the ground. Perhaps a clever skeptic can finesse this problem, but it is at least *prima facie* inconsistent to maintain both forms of skepticism.)

Well, skepticism is the kind of problem that never really goes away. We can either deny it, perhaps via Moorean means (which really amounts to ignoring it), or we can learn to live with it, perhaps via some *contextualist* stance (which really amounts to ignoring it on some occasions, but not others). Moore’s (1962) thought is simply that our knowledge of the external world is more firmly rooted than are the intuitions which underwrite skeptical challenges. According to contextualists, knowledge is elusive: it shifts given the epistemic context. If skeptical worries are, as it were, in the neighborhood – that is, if alternative possibilities that would defeat one’s evidence for believing some proposition *p* are not appropriately eliminated – then the standards for knowledge will be quite high. If such alternative possibilities are properly ignored, say in more humdrum, everyday circumstances, then the standards for knowledge will be much lower (DeRose 1992, 1995;

Lewis 1996; S. Cohen 1998). No matter which tack we employ in answering the skeptic, one thing seems clear: modal knowledge, at least of the basic sort posited by Van Inwagen and others, seems to be no worse off than perceptual knowledge. Assuming that our basic modal judgments are, like perceptual judgments, non-inferential and intuitive, then skepticism seems to be no more a problem for the first type of judgment than for the second. In other words, assuming that we can answer (or ignore) the skeptical challenges to perceptual knowledge, there is no reason to think that the same means cannot be employed for basic modal knowledge.

Lest we get too excited with the illustration and defense by analogy offered above, we should be reminded that the analogy holds only between basic, intuitive modal judgments and basic perceptual judgments, both of which are non-inferential. This kind of basic modal knowledge is mildly more interesting than reading possibilities off actuality. But what about non-intuitive modal knowledge? Are there modal facts that we don't *just see* and if so, how do we know them?

Another analogy with perceptual belief will prove helpful. We often reason from our perceptions and from other known facts about the world. Based upon my perceptual judgment that the apple in my hand is red, and my knowledge of facts about apples, I can infer that the apple is ripe and so safe to eat. This is a fact I can know. In like manner, based upon an intuitive modal judgment combined with known facts about the actual world, we can amplify our modal knowledge beyond the basic. Van Inwagen offers the following example:

Suppose, for example, that we know that it is not possible for water to be a different physical stuff from the physical stuff that it is – that no *other* physical stuff would be water (an example, perhaps, of 'basic' modal knowledge); and suppose we know that water is the physical stuff composed of molecules formed by joining a hydrogen atom to hydroxyl radical (a 'fact about how the world is put together'); then – or at least many have argued – we can validly conclude that water is *essentially* hydrogen hydroxide (1998: 82, n. 6).

From a basic modal belief and a basic belief about actuality we reason that it is impossible that water be some physical stuff other than hydrogen hydroxide. This is a general schema for inferring modal facts. We thus have in non-basic modal knowledge the analysandum most relevant for our project: any non-trivial modal knowledge gotten via art is likely to be of this type. And so we must ask of non-basic modal beliefs the truth-question and the justification-question. How do we form non-basic modal beliefs and what makes them true or false?

### **Modal Truth**

At risk of begging various tricky questions and conflating purported distinctions, I have opted for ‘metaphysical modality’ to individuate the relevant modality – non-epistemic and non-nomological. Opting for non-epistemic modality invites realism since, accordingly, propositions do not derive their modal status from some epistemic perspective or other; their modal status is therefore mind-independent. Modal truths are thus mind-independent, metaphysical facts as real as physical facts about that actual world around us.

This position is indeed suggested by the choice of non-epistemic modality. And there are in fact good reasons to endorse modal realism. One such reason is motivated by a dilemma discussed by Hawthorne (1996). On one hand, if we do not commit to the ontological reality of possibilities, then we inherit a semantic problem, namely, making sense of our everyday talk of possibility. On the other hand, if we commit to the ontological reality of possibilities (in a strong Lewisian sense or in a weaker sense, e.g. some type of ersatzism), we inherit an epistemological problem, namely, one of explaining our epistemic access to possibilities from which we are causally disconnected. As Hawthorne puts it, we make one problem tractable only at the cost of making the other seemingly intractable. As some of the following discussion will betray, I am compelled to take on the second horn of the dilemma: I incline to the metaphysical reality of possibilities and so have an epistemological story to tell. One should note that this dilemma roughly mirrors Benacerraf-type problems with respect to abstracta, and so opting for realism with respect to possibilities puts one in no worse a position than opting for realism about mathematical entities, properties, or other abstracta (Benacerraf 1965, 1970; Field 1980, 1989).

One can, however, opt for the first horn of the dilemma: one can deny modal realism and instead wrestle with the related semantic issues. With a bit of qualification, this move is consistent with maintaining non-epistemic modality. If the broad modal status of propositions is not real or objective in the mind-independent sense, then on what mind does it depend for its existence? It certainly does not depend upon any one epistemic perspective: this would be epistemic modality of the most local variety. Instead, when the anti-realist talks about the broad possibility or necessity of some proposition, she appeals to what we may call a *global epistemic modality*. Propositions are possible and necessary relative to a set of concepts, beliefs, and theories relevant to those propositions. The modal profile, for example, of water depends upon our linguistic practices, folk beliefs, and scientific theories with regard to water. This may sound a great deal like conceptual modality, and perhaps it is. Call it ‘global epistemic modality’ or

‘conceptual modality:’ either way, the crucial point is that such modality is not bound to any one mind or epistemic perspective. It is inter-subjective and locally mind-independent and thus in a good sense non-epistemic. Moreover, the semantic problem notwithstanding, this model benefits from certain theoretical features of possible worlds but does not entail commitment to the reality of possibilities.

A robust modal epistemology requires some account of modal truth: something must determine the facts of the modal matters. As the above discussion reveals, there are realist and anti-realist options here: we should hesitate to infer that any robust modal epistemology entails modal realism. For the realist, modal facts are, straightforwardly, metaphysically determined; it’s the epistemology that is hard. For the anti-realist (perhaps of the instrumentalist or fictionalist variety), the epistemology is easier and the modal facts derive from conceptual and theoretical frameworks (rather than the other way round, as for the realist). Here it’s the semantics that is hard. What is common to the two approaches is that broad modal profiles are non-epistemic and non-nomological. Modal truths are objective or agent-independent: they are facts about the world that do not depend upon you or me specifically. Modal truths are thus no less truths than truths from other domains such as history, physics, or mathematics. This is all we need to answer the truth question.

### ***Modal Beliefs and Justification***

Reasoning about modality has been called *modal intuition*, *modalization*, and *conceivability*. What’s common to the usage of these terms is some assumed or defined relation between the relevant mental operation and possibilities: conceivability and its ilk purportedly hook up with possibility in some way. The nature of this relation has been disputed since the early modern period, receiving considerable attention in the writings of Descartes and Hume, among others. Consider the following two theses.

(S) Conceivability entails possibility. If S can conceive of some state of affairs p, then p is possible.

(W) Conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility. If S can conceive of some state of affairs p, then S has good evidence, and thus good reason to believe, that p is possible.

(S) suggests a very strong conceivability/possibility link, (W) a considerably weaker one. After considering a variety of glosses on (S), David



Chalmers endorses a strong conceivability/possibility link (2000). Alternatively, Stephen Yablo endorses something like (W) (1993). One might be motivated to endorse (S) for a variety of reasons: it provides a schema for identifying *conceptual* modal truths; it suggests a means by which to *verify* modal truths; it satisfies strong internalist justificatory requirements or justificatory requirements for metaknowledge. These are reasonable aims but none of them are ours. Our aim is to sketch a model of justified true (first-order) modal belief. If modal truths are objective and (at least) locally non-epistemic then they do not depend for their truth upon our knowing them. The only remaining task then is to identify the means of accessing such truths. I take conceivability, in a sense to be clarified below, to provide such access: I endorse (W). What does it mean to conceive of a state of affairs where *p* and why should we think that such conceivings provide reliable evidence of possibility?

My characterization of conceivability borrows from the accounts of Chalmers (2002) and Yablo (1993). First, a relevant notion of conceivability can be gleaned from something Hume tells us: “whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence” (1739–40/2000: 1.2.2.8). Yablo takes this to be an analysis, if only a partial one, of conceivability. He proposes that, just as perceiving involves the appearance of truth, “*conceiving involves the appearance of possibility*” (1993: 5). Conceiving of some proposition *p* involves the appearance that *p* is possible: that *p* is possible is part of the content of the mental state in question. Second, conceiving is imagining: to conceive that *p* is to imagine some world where *p* obtains – where that world can be truly described in terms of *p*. In order to be a reliable guide to possibility, this imagining will need to be more robust than mere supposition or what we might call *bare propositional imagining*. We need not only to imagine that *p*, but also to imagine a fairly coherent situation where *p* is true, one where we are able to fill in arbitrary details without revealing any contradictions. In a way analogous to gathering evidence for beliefs, the more details we fill out, the better our epistemic situation with regard to the modal status of *p*. In Chalmers’ terms, our imagining will need to stand up to *rational reflection*. In Yablo’s terms, *p*’s possibility must *representatively appear* to us. If we are able to so imagine *p*, then we have good evidence that possibly *p* and so good reason to believe that possibly *p*.

The notions of *coherence* and *consistency* are doing important work here. Why should we think that a coherent, consistent imagining somehow tracks what is possible? We find our answer by considering the kinds of things that possible worlds are purported to be. According to realists, possible worlds are *coherent*, *consistent*, and *complete*. In fact, even anti-realists who



nonetheless recognize the theoretical utility of the possible worlds apparatus maintain these three features. Whatever else we should say about the relevant semantics, ontology, or epistemology, these three features – call them the ‘three Cs’ – are conceptually constitutive features of possible worlds. The first two of these features are also features of imaginings which justify modal beliefs. If imaginative attempts to access the modal status of *p* should prove incoherent or inconsistent, then one lacks evidence for the modal status of *p*. However, a coherent and consistent imagining of a situation where *p* is true provides evidence that *p* is possible; if one fails to imagine a coherent and consistent situation where *p*, one has evidence that *p* is not possible. In other words, one has evidence that there is some possible world where *p* if one’s imagining a possible world where *p*, after some reasonable amount of reflection, reveals no contradiction or incoherence. Similarly, one has evidence that there is no possible world where *p* if revelations of inconsistency or incoherence occur without fail. One is thus more or less justified in forming the belief that possibly (or not possibly) *p*. The fundamental thought here is that certain features of epistemic perspectives mirror the facts that they track. Coherence and consistency are essential features of possible worlds, and if imaginings are to justify modal beliefs they should themselves be coherent and consistent. It is in this way that coherence and consistency are justificatory marks for modal conceivings and thus for modal beliefs.

Consider one more analogy with perceptual belief. If my perception that the tomato is red is to justify my belief that the tomato is red, then the perceptual state had better, in some sense, be red. Now this, understood literally, is a notoriously bad way of understanding perception: my perceptual state is no more red than it is round or two feet tall or polka-dotted. But the content of this state is characterized as red: if prompted I would respond ‘yes, I sense red’ or ‘I see red.’ And it is this perceptual characteristic that justifies (at least in part) my belief that the tomato is red. In like manner, if an imagining can be characterized as coherent and consistent, then such features will justify (at least in part) beliefs formed on the basis of such imagining.

Note that the third ‘c’ has not been mentioned as required for reliable modal imaginings. As *complete*, determinate entities, possible worlds have countless details. But given our finite cognitive capacities, this feature of possibilia should not motivate a criterion for modal imagining. When doing metaphysics, we never *determinately* characterize a possible world in its entirety. Rather, we characterize part of a *determinate* possible world, focusing only upon the details relevant to the issues at hand. In like manner, to coherently imagine that *p* we do not *determinately* imagine a world where

p obtains, but rather, we imagine a *determinate* world where p obtains. As Yablo puts the point, we imagine “a *fully* determinate situation whose determinate properties are left more or less unspecified” (1993: 28). A determinate situation or object is one that has a kind of higher order property of determinacy, one where for each of its determinables there is an underlying determinate property. Yablo gives the following helpful example. In imagining a tiger, you imagine a determinate tiger even though you do not imagine the tiger as being striped in some particular way. In other words, the content of your imagining “is satisfiable by *variously* striped tigers, but not by tigers with *no* determinate striping” (1993: 27–8). Again, we only imagine the first: a determinate object or situation, not the second: each of its determinate properties. Completeness is thus not a justificatory mark for modal conceivings and beliefs.

### Summary

Consistent and coherent imaginations reliably track modal truth. Beliefs formed on the basis of such imaginings are justified. Modal truths obtain independently of any one epistemic agent. Thus if one believes possibly p upon the basis of a consistent and coherent imagining of a situation where p, and p is in fact possible, then one *knows* that possibly p. The account here is an externalist one: knowing that p requires only that certain facts obtain in the world and that one has formed the relevant belief(s) in reliable ways. Having knowledge does not require knowing that you’ve got it; having knowledge does not require showing or being able to show that you’ve got it. The first is a requirement for metaknowledge, the second and third, strict internalist requirements for knowledge.

(Open questions abound. How much rational reflection is required? What degree of conviction is required for knowledge-constituting modal beliefs? What is the metric for coherence? What about the fallibility of coherence judgments? The fallibility of introspection generally? Varying logical sensitivities of imaginers?)

## ART AND KNOWING POSSIBILITIES

Recall that the skeptical position says that art cannot provide propositional knowledge (K); even if it can, any such knowledge is cognitively trivial (T); finally, even if art can provide non-trivial propositional knowledge, it is not proficient at doing so (P). These challenges will be considered in turn.

**The Knowledge Challenge**

Assuming then, that modal knowledge is something that can be gotten, how does art help us get it? Consider the imaginative projects involved in reading a novel. Much of a fictional world is counterfactual and often far-fetched. The narrative prescribes that we imagine things that we know are not actually true. However, the counterfactual propositions that populate fictional narratives might be true in a different sense, namely, when understood modally as statements about possibility. Fictions, and more generally, works of art, present candidate modal truths. Moreover, they provide an imagined situation in which various propositions and their potential for modal truth can be considered. This is something that art works do very well and for which they should be valued.

But why should we think providing these fictional propositions and situations is going to reliably track modal truth? We shouldn't. We should not (and usually do not) just read a novel and then conclude – since the story made reasonable sense – that any of the various fictional propositions are conceivable and thus likely possible. This will not be a reliable means of acquiring modal knowledge, since art works often depict things that are in fact, not (metaphysically) possible. The claim, therefore, is *not* that artists are reliable authorities on modality.

The claim, rather, is that art works get us well on our way to determining the conceivability of various propositions. If a coherent and consistent imagining of a situation where *p* is true is required for the justification of a belief that possibly *p*, then art works do a great deal of the work for us. Art works (a) offer various candidate possibilities for consideration and (b) offer candidate situations or worlds in which such propositions might be true. Motivating (a) is straightforward: representational art works are chock-full of depicted counterfactual situations. But (b) requires a bit more care. Art works often depict their subject matters in ways that are coherent and consistent. (There are obvious exceptions to both: Burrough's *Naked Lunch* and much of Faulkner's stream of consciousness narratives are deliberately incoherent; further, fictions often tolerate inconsistencies, sometimes central sometimes not. See Walton 1990; Currie 1990.) Art works thus possess at least *prima facie* or surface coherence and consistency. Insofar as we are responsible epistemic agents, to reflect upon such situations or worlds is to determine whether surface coherence and consistency stands up to deeper reflection: we must conjoin various aspects of the situation and various aspects of the larger story or work, bring to bear our knowledge about the actual world and our knowledge about basic modal facts, and so on. If upon such reflection we are left with a coherent story where *p* obtains

(or if, alternatively, we fail to come up with such a story), then we have a good reason to believe that possibly  $p$  (or that not possibly  $p$ ). Should (not) possibly  $p$  be true, we have acquired a piece of modal knowledge. And the artist has played a crucial role in this process; she has facilitated our modal knowledge.

Granted, we often do not rationally reflect when engaging with art. Enjoyment of a novel or a film does not usually consist in our considering whether depicted situations are possible – that would miss much of the point of fiction. Most likely, rational reflection or modal consideration takes place when we step out of the fictional world, either as a kind of interlude in the engagement or perhaps after the initial engagement altogether. Nevertheless, it is the art that serves as facilitator of knowledge.

### *The Triviality Challenge*

Assuming that the above account is convincing, why think that the modal knowledge gained is valuable rather than, as Stolnitz puts it, “cognitively trivial”? This challenge can be parsed into two distinct challenges, one general and one art-specific. First, why think that modal knowledge is cognitively valuable? Second, why think that the modal knowledge obtained via art is cognitively valuable?

The reply to the general challenge is straightforward. Modal knowledge is anything but trivial: employment of modal knowledge in theoretical reasoning is extremely useful and powerful. Scientists and philosophers would be lost without appeal to thought experiments involving counterfactual possibilities (Horowitz and Massey 1991; Sorensen 1992; Gendler 2000). For example, in attempting an explanation of a newly discovered physical phenomenon, it might prove important that a physicist not restrict herself to nomological possibilities – to the physical laws as currently understood – since the phenomenon might not be explainable in such terms. The explanation might, in other words, require a new set of laws. The philosopher of mind needs to consider broadly possible ways that consciousness could arise and not just the ways, given the actual world and its physical laws, it could – thus the ubiquity of thought experiments involving zombies, brains in vats, and homunculi. Progress often results from consideration of a wider scope of possibility rather than limiting oneself to the narrower, nomological realm. Knowledge of metaphysical possibility is thus of significant theoretical value. This is sufficient to disarm the general triviality charge.

The cognitive value of modal knowledge is not limited to the theoretical. In acquiring such knowledge, we hone the imaginative skills required for

consideration of more mundane, nomological possibility. Ordinary circumstances often require knowledge of what could happen or could have happened. A successful dinner party requires consideration of the tastes and dietary needs of one's guests. In the courtroom, an attorney will make constant appeal to what might have happened. Plotting a war strategy will require consideration of what the enemy is capable of doing. Modal knowledge can aid – and thus be valued in a second sense – in these reasoning tasks as well. Modal knowledge requires imagination. Thus the acquisition of broad modal knowledge will exercise and improve our imaginative skills. More particularly, we sharpen our skills of rational reflection and thus improve our ability to recognize the conceivability or inconceivability of various states of affairs. The same kinds of imaginative skills are at work in considerations of all possibility, whether metaphysical, epistemic, or nomological. The more practice we have at coherently imagining metaphysical possibilities, the better we will be at coherently imagining a narrower scope of possibilities. Through the process of acquiring some 'knowledge *that*' – that is, propositional knowledge – we improve certain skills, thereby gaining or enhancing a kind of knowledge *how*.

And what of the art-specific triviality challenge? This challenge can be answered by ostension, with science fiction providing a wealth of relevant examples. Consider George Orwell's *1984* or Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* or the popular film series *The Matrix*. After considering such works, we recognize that there are possible worlds where entire populations are systematically monitored and controlled via radically advanced technologies, where human beings (or beings like humans) tap into a variety of surprising physical abilities like *grokking*, where computers have enslaved humans in remarkably Cartesian experience machines. Some of these worlds are very close to our own, some are very far away. Some of these situations are metaphysically possible but not nomologically possible; others are possible in both senses. Either way, the counterfactual setting of science fiction facilitates important reflection upon the human condition. Even when the situations or propositions are nomologically impossible (i.e. where *that* couldn't actually happen) we learn – through considering them – about the actual world, and our scientific and philosophical theorizing stands to benefit from such learning. The non-actuality and perhaps nomological impossibility of *Matrix*-type situations does not undercut lessons about human knowledge, experience, and consciousness. The nomological impossibility of much of the physics in Heinlein's books does not bar us from learning about human psychology and society. One of the most frightening things about *1984* is its proximity to actuality: Orwell depicts a close possible world, teaching us about the potential dangers of technology, human power struggle, and oppressive government. So it is that, through our engagement with art

works, we both acquire valuable knowledge of possibilities (metaphysical and nomological) and improve our skills of modal imagining and reflection.

### ***The Proficiency Challenge***

Finally, assuming that the knowledge and triviality challenges have been disarmed, what can we say about the provision of modal knowledge? Recall that the proficiency challenge (P) is that any useful knowledge obtained via art can be more efficiently or more reliably gotten elsewhere. How can this challenge be answered?

If the discussions to this point have proven persuasive, the proficiency challenge is the easiest to answer since it has, at least indirectly, been handled above. I offer a handful of considerations, various conjunctions of which are sufficient to show the relevant proficiency of art works. As already discussed, art works are rich sources for both candidate modal truths *and* situations for consideration of such propositions: art works explore counterfactual situations in complex and interesting ways. They thus provide us with a significant portion of the materials needed to responsibly ask questions like: ‘what if such-and-such?’ ‘could the world have been this way?’ ‘could this happen?’ Answering these kinds of questions invokes modal conceiving or imagining and herein lies another virtue of art works. Philosophers such as Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie have made a convincing case that representational art works invite and guide imaginings (Walton 1990; Currie 1990). Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* invites us to imagine various things about Christ and his followers; *Moby Dick* guides our imaginings with regard to a sailing crew and a giant whale; *Citizen Kane* leads imaginings about an ambitious man and his rise to success and solitude. Representational art works both trigger the mechanism of imagination and exercise this mechanism: novels, films, and paintings ask us to imagine and our imaginative skills improve when we comply. Moreover, these skills are exercised and improved through repeated engagement with a variety of works. Art works are not the only sorts of things to function as guides to our imaginings, but this does not speak against their proficiency in this capacity.

The final point is a general observation about the nature of engaging with art. Art works are cognitively arresting: they get our attention and make us think; they get under our skin, move us, shake our worlds. Various media accomplish this effect in various ways. The multi-modal nature of films sustains attention; the formal and contentful features of painting and sculpture are often revealing and surprising; information presented by narrative methods proves more effective for long-term retention (as Friend

argues in this volume). This virtue of art works does not relate directly to the provision of modal knowledge, but it does indicate that art works, being the sorts of things that sustain cognitive interest, are well-suited to provide us with knowledge. The simple fact that we attend to, and think about, works of art makes them exceptionally effective at providing epistemic materials, modal or otherwise. This point alone sheds serious doubt upon the proficiency challenge; conjoined with any or all of the others, it should render the challenge entirely implausible.

Art works enable reliably formed modal beliefs. The resulting knowledge is of significant theoretical and practical cognitive value and art is especially adept at enabling the acquisition of such knowledge. The proposed skeptical position is thus diffused. As these things typically go, however, the skeptic will not take his leave so easily: doubts surely remain. Fair enough, but this paper should secure, at the very least, the following modest purchase. The connections between modal knowledge and art works and the potential cognitive values therein should be recognized as fruitful domains of inquiry. A much-deserved analysis of these connections might well shed interesting light both upon modal epistemology and upon our cognitive engagement with art works. These are possibilities worth reflecting on.

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## Chapter 6

### CHARLEY'S WORLD: NARRATIVES OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Peter Goldie

Through directly perceiving an art work – seeing a picture or a sculpture, listening to music, reading a novel – we can come aesthetically to appreciate that art work, and also to gain an understanding of the world – of reality outside or beyond the work itself. A suitably informed critic can help us to do these things – to see what we otherwise would fail to see.

This is a view that I accept. I do not intend to argue for it here (see Sibley 2001a; Graham 1995; Young 1999, 2001). I will, however, consider an example from literature which I think nicely illustrates the truth of the view: it concerns the experiences of Charley, a character in a novel by Somerset Maugham called *Christmas Holiday*. Although fictional, what happens in the fiction illustrates how an art work's aesthetic properties, and its cognitive value, can come to be appreciated by someone (Charley) through his direct perception of it, in this case in the presence of someone else – a critic we might say. The particular art work that Charley experiences in the novel is a Chardin still life, hung in the Louvre, depicting a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine. I begin by discussing what happens in the novel, and give an account of how, in the novel, Charley is affected through his experiences.

I then turn to the reader, and consider how the reader of the novel can be affected by Charley's experience – more specifically by imagining the experiences that Charley has in the novel, and then by coming to be actually affected by what he imagines. The reader can be affected in at least two respects: first, by gaining a new worldly understanding; and secondly, by coming to have a changed aesthetic disposition – a different way of appreciating art works.



At this point, things will turn a bit tricky, for we will have been working on the implicit assumption that the Chardin still life that Charley experiences, while of course real *in the fiction*, does not, in fact, exist and hang in the Louvre, or at least it does not need to exist in order for the novel to have the effects on the reader that I have mentioned so far. But what if there is, in fact, such a Chardin in the Louvre, which, let us also assume, the reader has himself seen before reading the novel? Can the reader's imagining seeing the Chardin, as part of his imaginative engagement with the novel, affect his appreciation of its aesthetic properties in enabling him to see things in the work that he otherwise would have failed to see?

Answering these questions leads me in the concluding section to the final issue that I want to discuss, one concerning aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgment. It is a widely accepted view that the aesthetic properties and cognitive value of an art work cannot be appreciated without the art work's being perceived, or experienced, directly; so direct confrontation with an art work is *necessary* for these kinds of appreciation, as it is for aesthetic judgment. In the light of my discussion of how the reader of *Christmas Holiday* can be changed, I want at least to raise the question of whether these accepted views are as stable as one might initially think. While it is surely right to privilege direct aesthetic experience, it is a mistake to have too stark a dividing line here – one which is insufficiently faithful to the subtlety of the psychological phenomena.

In Somerset Maugham's *Christmas Holiday* (1939/2001), Charley is the son of Leslie and Venetia Mason. The family is rather prosperous. At the time of the events that take place in the novel, Charley is twenty-three, having spent three years at Cambridge and one in his father's private firm, where he will be expected eventually to take over. Charley has been brought up to appreciate art, albeit in a rather conventional way, especially by his mother, who considers herself to have good aesthetic taste.

As a treat, to celebrate Charley's passing the exams that will enable him to follow in his chosen calling as secretary of the Mason Estate, his father sends him to Paris for a Christmas holiday. He had been to Paris several times before, but always with his parents. This would be his first time alone, and his parents expect him to have a 'good time.' When he gets there, he calls on his old friend Simon, who takes him to a brothel. There, Simon introduces him to a girl, a Russian immigrant, called Lydia. On something of a whim, Charley invites her to the midnight mass at St. Eustache, for which he happened to have two tickets. When they get there, after the *Adeste Fidelis*, a choirboy sings a canticle, and suddenly Charley becomes conscious that Lydia is crying, in a way that causes Charley, being English and not brought up to be overly expressive, considerable embarrassment: "Her sobbing grew

more and more convulsive and suddenly she sank down on her knees and, burying her face in her hands, gave herself up to uncontrolled weeping. She was heaped up on herself strangely, like a bundle of cast-off clothes, and except for the quivering shoulders you would have thought her in a dead faint" (1939/2001: 55).

As the novel develops and Charley and Lydia talk (they do not make love that night or at any time), Lydia's past begins to emerge. When she came to Paris, knowing no one, she met and fell in love with a man called Robert Berger, a petty criminal of great charm. They married and she was blissfully happy. Then one night, after they had been married for only six months, Berger stabbed someone – a bookmaker – to death. That very night they made passionate love, without Lydia realizing what Robert had done. She became pregnant. Later, Robert was caught by the police, found guilty, and sent for fifteen years' penal servitude in French Guiana. The child was born dead. Lydia decided to become a prostitute, not to make money (she gave most of it to Robert's mother), but in repentance for the sins of the man she still loved, the man she would probably never see again.

During his short holiday in Paris, Charley has a number of aesthetic experiences in Lydia's company. First, there was the midnight mass at St. Eustache. Second, one morning they go to the Louvre to look at some pictures together (the event that I will concentrate on). Third, very late at night they go to a seedy nightclub to hear a Russian woman sing some Russian songs. And finally, the following day, in the hotel where Charley is staying, they play the piano: Charley plays some Scriabin, and then an arrangement for the piano of some Russian folk songs and folk dances; and then Lydia plays them – "badly, but for all that [she] got something out of the music that he hadn't seen in it" (1939/2001: 198).

During their visit to the Louvre, Charley tries to take Lydia to see all the 'famous' pictures – the *Giaconda*, *L'Homme au Gant*, and so on. But Lydia insists on taking him to look at just one picture, a still life by Chardin. This is the key passage for my purposes:

"Chardin," he said. "Yes, I've seen that before."

"But have you ever looked at it?"

"Oh, yes. Chardin wasn't half a bad painter in his way. My mother thinks a lot of him. I've always rather liked his still lifes myself."

"Is that all it means to you? It breaks my heart."

"That?" cried Charley with astonishment. "A loaf of bread and a flagon of wine? Of course it's very well painted."

“Yes, you’re right; it’s very well painted; it’s painted with pity and love. It’s not only a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine; it’s the bread of life and the blood of Christ, but not held back from those who starve and thirst for them and doled out by priests on stated occasions; it’s the daily humble fare of suffering men and women. It’s so humble, so natural, so friendly; it’s the bread and wine of the poor who ask no more than that they should be left in peace, allowed to work and eat their simple food in freedom. It’s the cry of the despised and rejected. It tells you that whatever their sins men at heart are good. That loaf of bread and that flagon of wine are symbols of the joys and sorrows of the meek and lowly. They ask for your mercy and your affection; they tell you that they’re of the same flesh and blood as you. They tell you that life is short and hard and the grave is cold and lonely. It’s not only a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine; it’s the mystery of a man’s lot on earth, his craving for a little friendship and a little love, the humility of his resignation when he sees that even they must be denied him.”

Lydia’s voice was tremulous and now the tears flowed from her eyes. She brushed them away impatiently.

“And isn’t it wonderful that with those simple objects, with his painter’s exquisite sensibility, moved by the charity in his heart, that funny, dear old man should have made something so beautiful that it breaks you? It was as though, unconsciously perhaps, hardly knowing what he was doing, he wanted to show you that if you only have enough love, if you only have enough sympathy, out of pain and distress and unkindness, out of all the evil in the world, you can create beauty” (1939/2001: 192–3).

Charley is profoundly changed by his experiences in Paris: not just by finding out about the terrible life that Lydia was condemned to, but also, and importantly, by his aesthetic experiences: the midnight mass, the Chardin, the Russian songs in the nightclub, the Scriabin. Concentrating on the Chardin, Charley is changed in several ways.

First, he gains an understanding of some aspects of reality through his own experience of the Chardin, not with his parents this time, but in the company of Lydia. He now understands how brutally hard and unforgiving so many people’s lives are. Lydia already knows this, partly through her own tragic experiences, and she saw it in the Chardin (the bread and the wine “tell you that life is short and hard and the grave is cold and lonely”). Charley, with his cosseted life, and his complacently narrow upbringing, had no idea that there could be such suffering, and it was only through this direct aesthetic experience, in the company of Lydia as ‘critic,’ that he now

was able to see what he failed to see before (see McAdoo 2001 on Sibley 2001*b* and the role of the critic).

The second change in Charley is in his aesthetic appreciation of the Chardin, through seeing it with Lydia. When Charley comes to understand, through looking at the Chardin in Lydia's presence, how much hard, unforgiving suffering there is in the world, he also comes to see aesthetic properties of the Chardin that he had not recognized before (not excluding the artist's intentions), and to see previously recognized aesthetic properties in a new light. The reader realizes this because Charley is disquieted just after seeing the Chardin with Lydia, saying to her,

"You see, I've been interested in art all my life. My parents are very artistic, I mean people might even say they were rather highbrow, and they were always keen on my sister and me having a real appreciation of art; and I think we have. It rather worries me to think that with all the pains I've taken, and the advantages I've had, I don't really seem to know so much about it as you do" (1939/2001: 195).

That Charley is changed in these two ways emerges clearly towards the end of the novel when he returns to London and to the welcome of his mother, his father, and his sister Patsy. After supper they ask him to play something on the piano. He chooses the piece by Scriabin that Lydia had thought he had played so badly; while he played he thought about his experiences in Paris. After he had finished they all commented that he played it differently: "I like the old way better, Charley. You made it sound rather morbid," said Mrs Mason. Then the novel ends with Charley thinking back on his experiences in Paris:

It was absurd, it was irrational, but that, all that seemed to have a force, a dark significance, which made the life he shared with those three, his father, his mother, his sister, who were so near his heart, and the larger, decent yet humdrum life of the environment in which some blind chance had comfortably ensconced him, of no more moment than a shadow play. Patsy had asked him if he had had adventures in Paris and he had truthfully answered no. It was a fact that he had done nothing; his father thought he had had a devil of a time and was afraid he had contracted a venereal disease, and he hadn't even had a woman; only one thing had happened to him, it was rather curious when you came to think of it, and he didn't just then quite know what to do about it: the bottom had fallen out of his world (1939/2001: 251).

This ending of the novel shows that there is a third way in which Charley was changed by his aesthetic experiences with Lydia: his aesthetic dispositions

were changed. No doubt if he went to Paris again, he would see that particular Chardin differently. Moreover, the next time he saw a *different* still life by Chardin, or heard or played a *different* piece by Scriabin, he would appreciate and understand their aesthetic properties in a new way. And I dare say his aesthetic dispositions would be changed more widely than that, to extend to other artists and composers, and to other kinds of aesthetic object.

What happened to Charley in the novel nicely illustrates the view with which I began: Charley's directly perceiving the Chardin enabled him aesthetically better to appreciate that art work, and to gain an understanding of the world that he did not previously have, influenced by the remarks and the emotional reactions of Lydia in the role of 'critic.' The example also brings out other interesting questions, which unfortunately cannot detain me here, regarding the interplay and temporal connections between gaining a new appreciation of aesthetic properties and gaining a new understanding of the world. Is there a clear-cut distinction between the two? How do they inform each other, and does the one have to be temporally and causally prior to the other (and which way round), or can they happen at the same time?

The question that I do now want to turn to is the effect of the novel on the reader: whether, and how, and in what ways, the reader's aesthetic appreciation and 'worldly' understanding can be changed. So the focus is now moving from Charley to the reader.

*Christmas Holiday* engages the sensitive reader's imagination, where this imagining is not just propositional but also perceptual (O'Shaughnessy 2000: ch. 11; Peacocke 1985). The sensitive reader imagines the events unfolding as they are narrated – imagines Charley seeing the Chardin still life of a loaf of bread and a flagon of wine, hearing Lydia's remarks about the picture, and beginning to be moved by it in the way that she encourages. And the reader imagines what it is like for Charley to come to appreciate the Chardin's aesthetic properties in a new way, what it is like for him to gain an understanding of the unforgiving hardness of the world that he did not grasp before, and what it is like for him to find his world at home in London as being of no more moment than a shadow play.

The way I have described what the reader imagines leaves it open whether the reader imagines the unfolding events 'from the inside,' adopting Charley's perspective, perhaps by putting himself in Charley's shoes; or whether he imagines from an external perspective – one that is appreciative of, and sympathetic to, what it is like for Charley (for the contrast, see Wollheim 1984; Gaut 1999; Goldie 2002a). In other words, it is possible to imagine someone's experiences – Charley's in this case – without imagining having those experiences from the inside (a controversial claim no doubt,

and one which I will argue for elsewhere). And, whether the sensitive reader imagines from the inside or from an external perspective, it is possible for him actually to be changed as a result of what he imagines through reading the novel (Moran 1994). He might come actually to be moved emotionally, actually to realize how hard and unforgiving life is for most people, and actually to feel that his own life, like Charley's, is of no more moment than a shadow play. In this sense, then, the sensitive reader gains worldly understanding through reading *Christmas Holiday*. He might also come to find that his actual aesthetic dispositions are changed. For example, he might have gained an ability to appreciate the symbolic properties of still lifes, so that the next time he sees a Chardin still life, or a still life by another artist, he does not respond as he would have responded had he not read *Christmas Holiday*.

It might be objected that these actual changes in the reader need not happen, if they do happen, as a result of a kind of imaginative experience, but rather as a result of gaining new propositional knowledge through reading the novel. The reader, according to this objection, reads various propositions in the novel about the Chardin, about the hardness of life, and about what the two characters, Lydia and Charley, felt on seeing the Chardin, and it is through gaining this new propositional knowledge that the reader is changed.

The point can, and should, be readily accepted. But it is not really an objection to what I am saying; it would only be an objection if the point were that *only* propositional knowledge could be communicated through the medium of the narrative. And this cannot be treated seriously as an account of all that is going on in the mind of an attentive and sensitive reader. Such a reader (who is, in this respect, the ideal reader) finds that the narrative emotionally engages him, enabling him to imagine Charley's experiences (whether or not from the inside), and actually to be moved by what he imagines. It would be a very unimaginative reader of *Christmas Holiday* (and far from an ideal one) who took away from it only propositional knowledge, as one might if one read a particularly dry account of the suffering of Russian émigrés in 1930s Paris. Between the experiences of the maximally imaginative reader and those of the thoroughly unimaginative one, there will be space for consider divergence in the manner and the extent of the changes wrought, depending on: how imaginative the reader is; how set in his old ways he is; how much he finds himself drawn to Charley's way of thinking of things; the extent to which he is familiar with art works like the Chardin still life in the novel – all these factors, and others besides, may be relevant. But the central point is this. Beyond gaining dry propositional knowledge, there is considerable space for a reader of *Christmas Holiday* to use his

imagination to a greater or lesser extent in order to gain an understanding of the world, and to develop a changed aesthetic disposition.

Charley is changed by his direct experience of an art work – the Chardin – which is of course real in the novel, but which so far we have implicitly assumed not, in fact, to exist. At least, it need not, in fact, exist in order to have the effects that it does on the reader. It need no more exist than Charley or Lydia, or Charley's parents' house in London. But let us now assume three things. First, let us assume that there is, in fact, such a picture in the Louvre, and that the reader knows this. Secondly, let us assume that the reader has himself seen the Chardin in the Louvre before reading the novel, and that his earlier response to it was very much like Charley's earlier response in the novel. And thirdly, let us assume that the reader considers, correctly, that the implied author of *Christmas Holiday* is reliable about the Chardin's aesthetic properties: that it has just the aesthetic properties that it has in the novel, and that are so vividly and emotionally picked out by Lydia; neither Charley nor the reader of the novel is being misled.

With these assumptions in place, there is now one more respect in which, I think, we can say that the reader is changed, in addition to gaining a new worldly understanding and gaining enhanced aesthetic dispositions: his aesthetics appreciation of the Chardin itself is changed. Not only will he be able to appreciate it better when and if he next sees it (this is an application of the dispositional point); but also his perceptual memory of the Chardin – the way he imaginatively recalls it – will be changed. That is to say, he will be able to remember what the Chardin looked like while he is reading the novel, and he will be able to deploy this perceptual memory in imagining the picture in a new way as he listens to what Lydia says. As a result, the picture will come to feature differently in his perceptual memory (see Wollheim 1980 on how changes in one's 'cognitive stock' can affect what and how one perceives).

There are many interesting and difficult questions here related to the role of testimony in aesthetic experience (e.g. Hopkins 2000; Meskin 2004, this volume). What I would like to suggest, though, is just this: the narrator of *Christmas Holiday*, addressing the reader as it were through the voice of Lydia, plays a role similar to that of a critic – in other words, a role analogous to that of Lydia in the novel, directly addressing Charley as he perceives the Chardin. Of course, the reader is not actually perceiving the Chardin while reading the novel, and in that respect matters are different between Charley and the reader. But we could remove that difference by assuming – and we have no reason not to assume this – that Charley, in the novel, had first glanced at the Chardin to remind himself what it looked like, and then had turned away from the picture and was standing looking at

Lydia as she was making her remarks, with the tears flowing from her eyes. Or we could even assume that Charley had not looked at the Chardin at all, choosing to rely on his perceptual memory of it as he listened to Lydia and watched her as she spoke.

There is a well-known passage by Frank Sibley about aesthetic perception that bears on these matters. Sibley says this:

It is of importance to note first that, broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of colour scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics. But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel (Sibley 2001a: 34).

Let's call this the experiential requirement. It is not unique to Sibley. A comparable requirement is discussed by Anthony Savile in relation to Kant. Although Savile allows the term 'judgment' for attributions of aesthetic properties not based on direct experience, for example those based on testimony, he privileges as judgments of *taste* only those "made on certain preferential grounds." One of these preferential grounds is that "my judgment that something is beautiful should arise out of my own sensible experience of that thing;" another is that "the judgment must result from within the crucial experience and not be merely externally related to it;" another, which is not my concern here, is that the experience must yield disinterested pleasure (Savile 1993: 5).

Charley satisfies the experiential requirement: his experience in the narrative is well represented as that of a person who comes to be "struck" by the aesthetic properties of the Chardin, although only after "repeated viewings" and with the "help of" a critic. What about the reader of the novel who, like Charley, has seen the Chardin before, and who, like Charley, needed the help of a critic? Does he fail to satisfy the experiential requirement so far as it concerns the Chardin? Is a changed aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment of the Chardin beyond him? Perhaps we should say that he does fail, on the grounds that he is "merely" learning about the Chardin "from others, on good authority."



But perhaps Sibley's "merely" is aimed at a different kind of case, such as when someone reliably informs you of something's aesthetic properties without in any way affecting your aesthetic perception. For example, you are listening to some music, and someone, "on good authority," tells you that the music is serene. You believe what he says, but your experience of the music remains unaltered – you fail to *perceive* its serenity. How are we to interpret Sibley here? He continues thus:

To suppose indeed that one can make aesthetic judgments without aesthetic perception, say, by following rules of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment... . Where there is no question of aesthetic perception, I shall use some other expression like 'attribution of aesthetic quality' or 'aesthetic statement.' Thus, rather as a colour-blind man may infer that something is green without seeing that it is, and rather as a man, without seeing a joke himself, may say that something is funny because others laugh, so someone may attribute balance or gaudiness to a painting, or say that it is too pale, without himself having judged it so (Sibley 2001a: 34–5).

Let us consider the two analogies in the last sentence, and compare each in turn with a reader of *Christmas Holiday*. Analogous to the color-blind man is the reader who has never had, and is incapable of, any kind of aesthetic experience at all. It is surely correct to say that such a reader fails Sibley's experiential requirement in whichever way it is understood. One is reminded of Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment, in which the scientist Mary had never had color experience. Her world was a black and white world. She could read off the color properties of red things, using her instruments and her scientific knowledge. So, Sibley would say, she might, for example, be able to make an 'attribution' of redness to a ripe tomato, but she could not *judge* that the tomato was red, because she did not know what it is for it (or anything) to *look* red (Jackson 1982, 1986; cf. Papineau 2002; Goldie 2002b). One could agree with Sibley about this. But our ideal reader of *Christmas Holiday* is clearly quite different from this: he is perfectly capable of aesthetic experience.

What about Sibley's second analogy? Is our ideal reader to be compared with the man who says that something is funny because others laugh, but who does not see the joke himself, or with the man who believes that the music is serene merely on good authority? Again, the answer is no. This analogy would fit a reader who reads the novel, accepts the opinion of the implied author about the aesthetic properties of the Chardin and thereby gains new propositional knowledge, but whose perceptual memory

and perceptual imagination remain unchanged by what he has learned. Our ideal reader is not like this either.

Because these two analogies are really so disanalogous to our attentive, sensitive and imaginative reader of *Christmas Holiday*, I interpret Sibley's experiential requirement as being satisfied by such a reader. The requirement will be so satisfied once Sibley's notion of 'aesthetic perception' is extended to include perceptual memory and perceptual imagination. But, whether or not this is the correct interpretation of Sibley, I think this is the right version of the experiential requirement. Such a requirement should not, in effect, include Charley while excluding the ideal reader of the novel; there are no relevant differences between them.

There is, however, one further possibility, which might prevent our accepting that our reader satisfies the experiential requirement. This is the thought that the novel sets out to furnish deductive or inductive proof to the reader of the picture's aesthetic properties, to enable the reader to reach a conclusion about those properties "by following rules of some kind." If Sibley, following Kant here, is correct that there are no such proofs, no such rules, then we must insist that the novel fails in its ambitions, and that the reader fails to satisfy the experiential requirement. But this is not what the novel sets out to do. Rather, the novel is playing very much the same role vis-à-vis the reader as Lydia is vis-à-vis Charley: the narrator is using rhetoric to persuade the reader to perceptually imagine the picture in a new light, in the light cast on it by Lydia, and to remember it perceptually in that new light. Such imaginative persuasion is not achieved, either by Lydia or by the novel, through deductive or inductive argument or through the application of rules (see Hopkins in this volume).

Thus I can see no reason to deny that our sensitive and imaginative reader satisfies the experiential requirement: he as much comes to perceive the Chardin's aesthetic properties in a new light as (within the reader's imagination) does Charley.

I would like to end with one further question. As we all know from our own experience, aesthetic perception of art works is highly varied in its quality. There is the Wollheim-like three hours spent in raptly attending to the picture and to nothing else; there is the fleeting glance as one hurries to one's lunch appointment; there is the long and steady gaze at the picture that one loves and is familiar with, while finding that, over-clouded by sorrows of one's own (to use Kant's famous phrase), one's aesthetic experience has gone cold on one; and then there is perception of all those reproductions, diverging greatly in fidelity, of pictures that one has not directly experienced. In the light of all this variety of aesthetic experience, is it right to insist, as Sibley and others do, that the contrast should be so stark between, on

the one hand, aesthetic judgment, and, on the other hand, *lesser* states of mind such as aesthetic 'statements' and "attributions of aesthetic property"? Surely what we need are more subtle and finely drawn ways of reflecting the variety of aesthetic experience, rather than being forced to insist on a simple 'yes' or 'no' to the question of whether someone is able to make an aesthetic 'judgment,' or on whether one has, or has not, satisfied some requirement. We can talk instead in terms of the degree or depth of understanding, of the manner and extent to which the imagination is engaged, of how aesthetic experience resonates through the mind, of the many and various effects on aesthetic dispositions, and of much more besides.

This is not to deny the primacy of direct and unmediated aesthetic experience. Ultimately aesthetic appreciation of aesthetic properties is answerable to direct human experience in general; and without oneself having had direct experience of an art work, there remains the endless possibility of being affected in ways that one had not imagined. This is the truth in the experiential requirement. But to acknowledge this should not oblige us to put all kinds of direct experience of art works on a par, as contrasted with all kinds of indirect experience, also on a par, with the latter effectively dismissed as not only all equally indirect, but also all equally second best. To insist on a stark dividing line here is to fail to appreciate the manner and extent to which the psychological and cognitive effects of perception, of perceptual imagination, and of perceptual memory, when directed towards an art work, can vary from case to case. The phenomena deserve more careful treatment.

## Chapter 7

### REALLY BAD TASTE

Jesse Prinz

It is a tired platitude that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As ancient Romans put it, *de gustibus non disputandum est*. Yet, we all suppose that some people have better taste than others. There are facts about which things are beautiful, and some people are more sensitive to those facts. In short, taste seems to be both subjective and objective. Confronted with this familiar puzzle, philosophers have generally tried to have it both ways, arguing that taste can be simultaneously subjective and objective. Objectivist subjectivism is motivated by considerations that must be accommodated by any theory of aesthetic properties, but I will argue that it is the wrong strategy. Philosophers have overstated the objectivity of taste. We need a form of subjectivism that can accommodate our objectivist intuitions without going the full nine yards. I will outline such a theory. The theory is of potential use to epistemology. For one thing, it points to an account of what it means to know that an art work has aesthetic merit. For another, the account of aesthetic properties on offer is structurally isomorphic with a novel theory of knowledge that has some promise of being true. I will only gesture at that theory. My goal is not to defend a theory of knowledge here but to indicate, as an afterthought, that epistemologists may have a great deal to learn from aesthetics – far more than people ordinarily suppose.

## OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

### *Some Definitions*

It is important to get clear on some definitions. I will use the word ‘real’ for properties that can be truly and falsely ascribed. Real properties are properties that exist. Hence, discourse about the real is truth-apt, and, moreover, sentences about real existents can be true. Defined this way, realism does not contrast with anti-realism as defined in philosophy of language by authors like Dummett (1978). In that field, ‘anti-realism’ is a rather misleading name for something closer to subjectivity. ‘Realism,’ on the use I prefer, contrasts with nihilism or non-factualism. The former encompasses error theories, and the latter encompasses emotivism. I will not discuss such theories here.

Subjectivity is response-dependence. Something is response-dependent if its existence (reality) depends on reactions in some group of sentient or cognizant beings. Those reactions can be defined either dispositionally or non-dispositionally. Secondary qualities, as they are traditionally construed, are dispositionally response-dependent. One might even say that redness (if it is a secondary quality) existed before life on Earth, because there were things then that would now dispose us to have certain reactions. Other response-dependent properties are not dispositional. Someone is a suspect in a crime investigation only if she has elicited a response already, namely being regarded as a suspect by criminal investigators.

Objectivity is a bit more slippery, because it has been defined in two very different ways. On one definition, an objective property is a property that can exist independent of any responses we might have to it. Objective properties inhere in the objects that possess them. They are *not* response-dependent. On another definition, ‘objective’ means something like unbiased. Here, objective properties may depend on responses but those responses must arise in conditions that are free from certain biases. Such objective properties are also subjective. On both of these definitions, objectivity is related to absolute truth. A truth is absolute if there is a single fact of the matter. Absolute truths hold universally. They contrast with relative truths. A truth holds relatively if it depends on a particular vantage point *and* the relevant vantage points are potentially variable.

Finally, let me define a couple of properties that pertain more specifically to the topic under discussion. An aesthetic property is a property in virtue of which someone would justifiably assess an art work as aesthetically good or bad. Beauty, harmony, and originality are possible examples. Taste is a capacity to discern and assess aesthetic properties. Good taste is the capacity

to do so well. To say that taste is objective is to say that good taste is responsive to aesthetic properties that art works have objectively. On the above definitions, that means either that people with good taste can discern response-independent aesthetic properties or that people with good taste can discern aesthetic properties that would be regarded as good universally, if assessed without bias. To say that taste is subjective is to say that taste discerns properties that vary as a function of our responses.

### *Arguments for Objectivity*

We often talk as if taste were responsive to objective aesthetic properties. Two arguments suggest that our aesthetic concepts presuppose objectivity.

First, contrary to the Latin platitude, we presume that aesthetic properties are open to debate. In this, aesthetic taste differs from simple gustatory taste. If one person says that beluga caviar tastes good, and another person says it tastes terrible, there may be no real disagreement. It is not just that foods taste good *to* one person and bad *to* another. We can speak intelligibly about flavors being good *for* one person and bad *for* another. The goodness and badness of a flavor is response-dependent and relative to a taster. Of course, we can also make aesthetic judgments about food. You can acknowledge that the chef's creation was masterful even if she used ingredients that you detest. We say caviar is better than Big Macs, even if many people prefer Big Macs. We can rationally debate whether Bordeaux reds are better than Rhones.

The same is true of art works. If I say that Jackson Pollock is better than Julian Schnabel, I take myself to be asserting a fact that holds independently of my taste. You may try to persuade me that I am wrong by enumerating the features that make Schnabel's work meritorious. If aesthetic debates lack objective grounding, then it is hard to explain why they persist. Why don't I just shrug when I hear you proclaim your love of Schnabel? Why do I think you are just plain wrong? The most natural answer is that I assume that aesthetic properties are objective and that you have really bad taste.

Another argument stems from the existence of aesthetic experts. We tend to think that some people have better taste than others. We try to improve our own taste by reading *Wallpaper* or *Nest*. We consult decorators. We read the opinions of art critics. We also criticize the taste of others. We even tend to think that *most* people have bad taste. This suspicion seemed to be confirmed when Komar and Melamid found that most Americans prefer stock landscapes and historical portraits to interesting abstractions (Wypijewski 1999). Popular taste tends to be sentimental, saccharine, and overly concerned with prettiness. Members of the art world think that these

preferences are inferior and untutored. The assumptions that experts exist and that error is possible suggest that we tend to think of aesthetic properties as objective. Expertise is characteristic of domains occupied by natural kinds. Experts are those who are best disposed to discover the absolute truth.

The argument from aesthetic debates and the argument from expertise seem to support the same conclusion. We engage debates and consult experts because we are objectivists about aesthetic properties.

### *Arguments for Subjectivity*

The preceding arguments suggest that taste can be objectively good or bad. Other arguments suggest that taste is subjective – that aesthetic properties depend on us. I will consider three arguments to that effect.

The first begins with the observation that our responses to art works are often emotional. This is not restricted to art works that are designed to pull on our heartstrings. Music can make us feel sad or ebullient; films can amuse us or frighten us. But the point I have in mind is more general than that. All successful art work can have an emotional impact. We admire art. We are subtly thrilled when we encounter an art work that is successful, even if it is a sad sonata. And we are mildly disgusted when we encounter an art work that is unsuccessful, even if it is a whimsical portrait of a clown. Aesthetic emotions of praise and aversion can come in different forms: thrills, pleasure, amusement, disgust, contempt, smug dismissal, to name a few. All of these can be placed under the umbrella terms, appreciation and depreciation.

I think appreciation and depreciation are essential to art. A property qualifies as aesthetic only if it is disposed to cause one of these emotions. In this respect, aesthetic properties may be like evaluative properties in the moral domain. Some moral philosophers have argued that moral goodness and badness are defined with reference to human feelings of approbation and disapprobation (Hume 1739–40/2000; McDowell 1985; Wiggins 1987; Prinz forthcoming). On these theories, someone who did not experience moral emotions would not understand what moral properties really are. One can defend a parallel moral in the aesthetic domain. Imagine someone who learned to reliably distinguish art works that other people regarded as good and bad. And imagine that she does this dispassionately. The works that she identifies as good do not stir her in any way. She doesn't appreciate them. From initial observations, we might think that she has good taste, but we quickly discover that she has no taste: no preferences, feelings, or interest in art. There is a strong temptation to say that she doesn't really

understand what aesthetic properties are. She knows what objects have them, but she is missing something fundamental about what the aesthetic consists in. Compare a congenitally blind person who carries around a device that allows him to reliably identify colors. One wants to say that he knows which things are blue, but that he doesn't really know what blueness is. Similarly, for our dispassionate art-sorter. If I am right, then aesthetic properties are subjective. They depend on emotional responses in us.

Consider a second argument for subjectivism. If aesthetic properties were not subjective then they would supervene on properties that were not psychological. Yet, this does not seem to be the case. First, aesthetic properties cannot all be intrinsic to art works. Works with the same intrinsic properties can differ in aesthetic value. The classic demonstration, of course, is a forgery. Intuitively, forgeries are less worthy of appreciation than originals. We would question the taste of someone who declared otherwise. Second, it's not clear which intrinsic properties would count. One might appeal to things such as compositional balance, but that seems neither necessary nor sufficient. Good works can be imbalanced, and balanced things (such as a well distributed skin infection) can be unaesthetic. Third, it's not clear how properties that we value aesthetically are unified if not by means of our reactions to them. Composition, cleverness, ineffability, originality, dissonance, consonance, playfulness are a mixed bag bound together by the fact that we appreciate them. In response, one might concede that aesthetic qualities are not intrinsic while denying that they are response-dependent. On some institutional theories of art, aesthetic properties derive from institutional and historical facts. But institutional facts include human responses. On plausible versions of institutional theories, aesthetic value depends on the attitudes of people in the art world.

One final argument for subjectivity will suffice. When defending aesthetic judgments, we often give reasons. One might argue that Rothko is great in virtue of his luminous colors or his tranquil, spiritual torment. What if the debate turned to these features? Why value luminosity or spiritual torment? At this point, reasons may give out. The Rothko enthusiast must simply pound the table. Luminosity is not beautiful to her for any *reason*; it is beautiful because it causes an aesthetic emotion. It is a response-dependent property. Aesthetic standards are standards that relate features of form, content, and context to emotional responses. In debates, we can enumerate the features we appreciate, but, at a certain point, we cannot justify our appreciation.

Like the arguments for objectivity, these arguments are non-demonstrative, but they suggest that subjectivism is a good default position.



## OBJECTIVIST SUBJECTIVISM

### *The Standard Strategy*

We have *prima facie* reason to think that aesthetic properties, and hence taste, are both objective and subjective. At first, this sounds contradictory, and, on one definition of objectivity, it is. Aesthetic properties cannot be both response-dependent and response-independent (though there could be some of each). On the second definition of objectivity, given above, objectivity and subjectivity are compatible. Objectivity is freedom from bias. Since aesthetic properties seem both objective and subjective, many philosophers have tried to have it both ways. Let me illustrate with two classic versions of objectivist subjectivism.

Hume (1757/1987) argues that aesthetic properties are determined by the subjective responses of a good critic, but he thinks that a good critic is unbiased, so her subjective reactions deliver objective truths. More specifically, Hume defines a good critic as one who has four properties: delicacy of taste, good sense, practice in making aesthetic judgments, and freedom from prejudice. The last of these features is especially relevant. Freedom from prejudice involves an understanding of the conditions under which a work was created and of its intended audience. The good critic puts personal preferences to one side and makes an aesthetic judgment that is appropriate to the work. Two perfect critics, from different cultural backgrounds, should arrive at the same assessment (cf. Friday 1998 for a different interpretation of Hume). Most critics are far from perfect, but they can strive for objectivity. On this reading of Hume, aesthetic truths are determined by the appraisals of perfect critics, or ‘ideal observers.’

For Kant (1793/2000), aesthetic properties are also both objective and subjective. Aesthetic beauty is the subjective property of causing a special pleasure in us that arises when something appears to serve a purpose but that purpose cannot be ascertained. Kant insists that this pleasure must be ‘disinterested,’ not deriving from personal gratification or fulfillment of goals. He also claims that the human faculties of imagination, understanding, and reflective judgment are universal. These shared faculties allow us to recognize purposeless purposiveness. If we abandon personal interests, the pleasure derived from universally recognizable instances of purposeless purposiveness will be the same for all of us. In a word, Kant believes that aesthetic judgments are objective.

Hume and Kant accommodate the intuitions favoring objectivity. Aesthetic judgments can be mistaken because they can be biased. One can project one’s own preferences or interests. It is worth debating aesthetic

questions because we want to determine whether our judgments are correct, and we want to contest the judgments of others, when they conflict with ours. There is a fact of the matter. We also see a role for experts, especially in Hume. Reasonable, discerning, experienced judges, who are good at bracketing personal preferences, are more reliable than the rest of us. For Kant, all healthy-minded people have access to beauty, but some might be more able to judge works with the required disinterest. Deficiencies in understanding, imagination, and reflection may compromise objectivity as well. It takes cognitive skill to discern cases of purposelessness and purpose: da Vinci's *Last Supper* has a clear liturgical and didactic purpose, which one must be able to look beyond to find purposelessness, while an Ad Reinhardt black painting may seem pointless to those who cannot recognize the cryptic meaning in the choice of pigment.

### ***Problems for Objectivist Subjectivism***

I think Hume and Kant go too far in trying to find objectivity in aesthetic value. One minor worry is that they set standards that are impossible to achieve. Can one ever free oneself from bias or interest so completely as to view art works objectively? To do so would arguably be to escape one's identity, which may be neither possible nor desirable. The problem is more obviously pressing for Hume, who claims that an ideal critic would abandon the preferences of her culture: "a critic of a different age or nation... must place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment" (Hume 1757/1987: 239). It is impossible to utterly disregard our personal and cultural histories. Kant does not emphasize this requirement for objectivity, but that is a weakness of his account. Unlike Hume, he fails to fully appreciate the extent to which cultural settings can influence taste.

Another worry is that a position free from bias and interest, were it possible, would deprive taste of any foothold. If taste is ordinarily influenced by our biases, then perhaps it derives from our biases. A person without enculturation may lack aesthetic preferences.

One can also object that freedom from bias is a poor reconstruction of our objectifying intuitions. When I debate matters of taste with you, I am presupposing that my biases are better than yours, rather than presupposing that I am less biased. And when I consult an expert, I may hope to find someone with a strongly biased opinion. This is particularly evident in fashion taste. When selecting a wardrobe, we want the clothing that best matches current biases, not something timeless or appealing to all. 1980s fashion is ghastly in hindsight, but those who anticipated that taste would change still chose to wear it. Good taste is often taste for fleeting trends.

In response to this last complaint, the Humean or Kantian might try to treat aesthetic properties indexically. They might say that the person who is free from bias can recognize that an outfit is good for the 1980s, or that a song is a perfect heavy metal ballad, or that a painting would have been captivating to a member of the eighteenth-century English petite bourgeoisie. This approach captures biases within an objective framework. But it is a form of pluralism, not universalism. If we ask, 'is that painting worthy of aesthetic praise?' the pluralist will respond, 'well it depends on who is evaluating it.' Unlike praiseworthiness in general, 'praiseworthy for an eighteenth-century Englishman' is a perfectly objective property. That property is not response-dependent. Something can be praiseworthy for an eighteenth-century Englishman without anyone being disposed to notice that it is. That kind of objective property cannot be what aesthetic judgments are intended to track. It is a meta-aesthetic judgment, not a first-order aesthetic judgment. When the critic says a work is good, she seems to be saying something about the merits of the work itself, not something about who finds it meritorious. This is like the contrast between 'her figure would have been considered attractive in Rubens's time' and 'her figure is attractive.' These have different truth conditions. Aesthetic theories that aim for freedom from bias run the risk of undermining aesthetic discourse.

This leaves us in a quandary. The arguments offered above provide good reason for thinking that taste is both objective and subjective; but attempts to accommodate both may go too far towards objectivity. If I am right, an objectivist theory of taste will not succeed. Yet the intuitions favoring objectivism must be addressed. Simple-minded subjectivism won't do.

## PLURALISTIC SENTIMENTALISM

### *Objectivism Reconsidered*

Let us re-examine the arguments for objectivism. First, there was the point about aesthetic debates. The existence of such debates suggests that *some* disagreements about aesthetic matters are legitimate, but it does not show that *all* are. Contrast some cases. Imagine a debate between two art critics who write for the same publications. One insists that Damien Hirst is an overrated charlatan, while the other says he's the best British artist since Francis Bacon. Next, imagine a debate between the art critic who extols Cy Twombly and an ordinary American college student thinks Twombly is laughably bad because 'anyone could do that.' Or to be a bit more far-fetched, imagine a debate between a time-traveling contemporary art critic who adores Richard Serra and an eighteenth-century Englishman who

is utterly baffled by minimalism. In the first case, the debate between two contemporary critics, the issue seems legitimate. The critics probably subscribe to similar principles concerning which features are worthy of aesthetic appreciation, and the question is whether Hirst's work has any of those features. In the second case, where the critic confronts the student, the standards probably aren't shared. They are, in some sense, talking past each other when they dispute the value of a Twombly painting. But the critic is enjoining the student to adopt a new set of standards. In the third case, where a critic confronts a member of another culture, standards may be different to the point of incommensurability, and debate may be a pointless exercise. Alternatively, there may be enough overlap to achieve a common standard of assessment. The contemporary critic may try to win the debate by appealing to Richard Serra's technical mastery of materials or his sense of space.

These examples suggest that aesthetic debates can vary in degrees of commensurability. In some cases, there is a common set of standards to which both are committed; in other cases there are no common standards. In cases of the latter kind, debate may still be worthwhile. We believe that others benefit from having taste like ours, and we surely benefit when others agree with us. Consider issues about public sculpture or government funding for the arts. Getting the majority to see the world from an art critic's point of view (or inducing the critic to see the world from our point of view) looks like a valuable exercise. Moreover, if taste is partially constitutive of identity, debating taste is part of a more general project of affiliation, conformity, dominance assertion, and self-preservation.

Now consider the argument from experts. The fact that we sometimes defer to the taste of others does not entail that taste is objective. There can be multiple standards. Deference can be a matter of choosing to follow someone else's standard or consulting someone who is more familiar with the standards one has already endorsed. The plurality of deference patterns is evident when we consider the interaction between taste and class. The highbrow elite look to different role models than do blue collar workers or teens on the street. These groups self-consciously select different standards and heed different experts.

These considerations suggest that the original arguments for objectivism were flawed. Those arguments show something weaker. They show that radical individualism is false. Our concept of taste is inconsistent with the possibility that each person is a perfect expert, that each person creates the truth conditions for her own taste judgments. The platitude that beauty is in the eye of the beholder misleads. It should not be interpreted as the view that each person's aesthetic judgments have equal claim to truth. Rather,

it should be understood as a recognition of both subjectivism (beauty is partially in us) and pluralism (beholders may vary). Other platitudes, such as ‘there is no accounting for taste’ and ‘different strokes for different folks’ can be understood along similar lines. The platitude, ‘to each his own,’ sounds radically individualistic, but it is usually used as a way of opting out of debates. It can be interpreted as ‘each person has the right to select from available standards.’ When standards clash, opting out of debate may be the most rational strategy. For there may be little hope for rational adjudication when such situations arise.

### ***Pluralistic Sentimentalism***

I am now in a position to offer a theory of aesthetic value. I have argued that there are reasons to think aesthetic value is subjective and, more specifically, dependent on a class of affective responses which can be grouped as cases of appreciation and depreciation. I have also suggested that taste is not radically individualist – some debates about taste are rational, and some people have better taste than others. On the other hand, there is little hope for finding universal taste. We need a kind of pluralism.

I propose the following rough analysis of Pluralistic Sentimentalism about Aesthetic Value:

Sentimentalism: an art work is *aesthetically good (bad)* for an evaluator if that evaluator upholds aesthetic standards that dispose those who internalize them to experience emotions of appreciation (depreciation).

An *aesthetic standard* is a norm governing emotional responses to features of art works, including intrinsic features and their mode of production.

To *uphold* a standard is to internalize it or to defer to someone who internalizes it.

Pluralism: there is no single standard for aesthetic evaluation.

The analysis needs fine tuning, but it is a starting place. It accommodates the constraints that have been introduced here. First, it allows that taste can be really good or bad. Taste is good for an evaluator if it accords with her standards, and bad if it fails to. It allows that there may be many different standards of taste, but it does not entail radical individualism. Most of us have a mix of internalized standards and standards that we obtain by deference. To defer is to believe that someone has better taste, and to trust that person on matters of taste. For example, I don’t like the work of

Thomas Gainsborough, and I don't like Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings, but I defer to critics who do. I can consistently dislike these works while judging them to have great aesthetic value because I trust those experts who do appreciate them. Such patterns of deference promote the sharing of standards without requiring objectivity. We can have rational debates with people who uphold the same or similar standards. People who uphold different standards are talking past each other, but they may have good reason for doing so. Debates about artistic merit can shift or raise standards.

One might worry that Pluralistic Sentimentalism is vulnerable to an objection that I raised against some forms of objectivism. The analysis above defines what it is to be aesthetically good *for an evaluator*. This may appear to interpret claims about aesthetic value as meta-aesthetic claims about the values of particular evaluators. Above, I complained that such an analysis would undermine aesthetic discourse rather than accounting for it. Is Pluralistic Sentimentalism guilty of the same charge? I think not, for there is a subtle difference between Pluralistic Sentimentalism and the pluralistic version of objectivism that I considered above. On the objectivist theory, saying that something has aesthetic merit is like saying that it is appreciated by someone at some time. On Pluralistic Sentimentalism, saying that something has aesthetic merit is like saying that it has merit *to me* – I endorse the standards that warrant appreciation. So an evaluator is not merely commenting on how others react; she is giving her evaluation.

## AESTHETIC JUDGMENTS AND KNOWLEDGE

What does any of this have to do with epistemology? First, it gives us an account of aesthetic knowledge. Knowing which art works are good is a matter of knowing what causes appreciation in people who have the standards that you uphold. More surprisingly, it offers a promising model for what knowledge is *in general*. I conclude with a rough sketch.

I suspect that knowledge is both response-dependent and pluralistic. First, consider the pluralism. Epistemic contextualists have persuasively argued that the conditions for knowledge are relative to standards that can shift from context to context (e.g. DeRose 1992). Debates between dogmatists and skeptics are debates between individuals who uphold different standards. Such debates are spurious, in that the meaning of 'knowledge' is not consistent, but they are nevertheless motivated, in that we often have reason to get others to adopt the standards that we uphold.

The claim that knowledge is response-dependent is more anachronistic. I think that knowing involves feelings of certainty or confidence, which can

be regarded as epistemic emotions. It seems difficult to imagine someone who claimed to know that *p* but had no confidence that *p*. Asserting ‘I know that *p*, but I don’t feel certain that *p*’ sounds like a Moore sentence. Knowing should at least *dispose* one to confidence. The feelings of certainty may explain why we are reluctant to revise the beliefs we take ourselves to know. The feelings also explain cases where we take ourselves to know something without being able to provide the evidence.

These considerations suggest the following account (see Chrisman 2003 for a related account along non-factualist lines) of Pluralistic Sentimentalism about Knowledge:

Sentimentalism: A true belief is *known* for its evaluator if that evaluator upholds epistemic standards that dispose those who internalize them to experience emotions of certainty or high confidence.

An *epistemic standard* is a norm governing emotional responses to features of beliefs, including intrinsic features and their mode of formation.

To *uphold* a standard is to internalize it.

Pluralism: There is no single standard for epistemic evaluation.

The sentimentalist clause conveys the idea that knowledge involves affective responses. It is defined over evaluators of knowledge. An evaluator might be the person who has the belief that is known, but it can also be a person who is ascribing knowledge. Consequently, knowledge ascriptions have truth conditions that are relative to their ascribers rather than ascribees. If we are talking about someone with low epistemic standards, we are not committed to saying that they know things that we would not regard as known given our own standards.

The major structural difference between this analysis of knowledge and my analysis of aesthetic value is that it does not mention deference. I do not think we ordinarily uphold knowledge standards by deference to others. There are no epistemic experts in the way there are aesthetic experts, though of course there are experts who have knowledge to which we defer.

This is just an outline, of course, not a serious explication or defense. I end with this tease, because I think it teaches an important lesson. Aesthetics, which is treated as a marginal subfield, may offer insights into epistemology, which modern philosophy has placed at the center. Knowing the True may be like knowing the Beautiful. And both may resemble knowing the Good. It’s all evaluation, and values issue, like blood and bile, from human feelings.

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## Chapter 8

# SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

Aaron Meskin

Anti-realism holds an attraction for many philosophers across the range of evaluative domains. But while some of the motivations for anti-realism are shared in the ethical and aesthetic domains (e.g. the existence of widespread and apparently ineliminable disagreement, worries about verification), others are domain-specific. For example, internalism – in particular motivational internalism (the view that there is an internal connection between moral judgment and motivation) – drove much of the ethical anti-realism of the latter half of the twentieth century, but motivational internalism has never played a significant role in arguments for aesthetic anti-realism, since the internalist intuition is much less robust in aesthetics than in ethics.

In this paper I focus on a distinctive motivation for aesthetic anti-realism – a motivation that I refer to as *the puzzle of aesthetic testimony*. This puzzle has to do with a noticeable difference between the way we treat aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony. While we are quick to form beliefs on the basis of what others tell us about many non-aesthetic matters, we are hesitant to form aesthetic judgments on the basis of what others tell us. And while we are often comfortable counting someone as justified on the basis of non-aesthetic testimony, we tend not to be so inclined in the aesthetic case. These are puzzling disanalogies, and – as I shall show – they lend some attraction to aesthetic anti-realism. But aesthetic anti-realism can be resisted. I offer a solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony that is perfectly consistent with full-fledged aesthetic realism.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF INFORMAL TESTIMONY

One common process of human belief-formation involves the informal testimony of others. Particularly dramatic evidence of this can be found in the development of scientific and metaphysical beliefs in young children (Harris 2002). And this process of belief-formation is – at least in many cases – an epistemically valuable one. Although Locke denied the possibility of knowledge on the basis of informal testimony (1690/1975: 1.4.23, 4.16.10–11), and although thoroughgoing skeptics will no doubt concur with Locke, there is widespread agreement among philosophers that the testimony of others can be – and often is – a source of both justification and knowledge. Not only do we often form beliefs on the basis of others' testimony, we are often warranted in so doing; hence, the beliefs that result from the process of testimonial uptake often possess justification and may even underwrite knowledge. For example, we regularly form beliefs about the biographies of our friends and loved ones on the basis of their testimony about these domains, and these beliefs are often justified. In fact, without the capacity to acquire knowledge by testimony, our epistemic situation would be seriously compromised. Much of what we know – and most of what we know in certain domains (e.g. the natural sciences) – is acquired by means of what we are told.

The central dispute among epistemologists is why, and under what conditions, testimony provides justification and knowledge. Reductivists hold that testimonially supplied justification is essentially dependent on other, more basic, sources of justification and knowledge (e.g. induction). Non-reductivists, on the other hand, hold that testimony is an independent source of justification, neither dependent on prior justification nor on some other more basic epistemic faculty. Much ink has been spilled in the dispute between these two camps (e.g. Coady 1992; Burge 1993; Webb 1993; Audi 1997; Graham 1997, 2000; Schmitt 1999; Elgin 2002; Weiner 2003). Nonetheless, that testimony may, at least under some circumstances, provide justification and knowledge is as close to beyond dispute as philosophical matters get.

## THE ACQUAINTANCE PRINCIPLE AND THE PUZZLE OF AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

Before I discuss the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, I should say a bit more about what I mean by 'aesthetic testimony.' I use the expression to refer to informal testimony about beauty, artistic value, or aesthetic value. I understand such informal testimony to consist in the expression of

evaluative aesthetic judgments; that is, judgments – expressed in assertoric form – that purport to attribute verdictive properties such as beauty, aesthetic value, or artistic goodness. Moreover, testimony is typically understood as mere assertion; that is, it is understood as assertion without argument or reason-giving (Elgin 2002). So aesthetic testimony is distinct from aesthetic argument and reason-giving, and arguments against the possibility (or value) of the latter do not necessarily impugn the former.

Nevertheless, the puzzle of aesthetic testimony may be seen as one manifestation of a deeper aesthetic phenomenon, which goes by the name of ‘the Acquaintance Principle.’ Here is Richard Wollheim’s characterization of that strange principle: “the Acquaintance Principle... insists that judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects” (1980: 233). (‘First-hand experience’ is typically thought of in terms of perceptual experience, but it is open to a friend of the acquaintance principle to broaden this so as to make sense of our aesthetic judgments of abstract objects.) Kant was arguably the first to express a version of the Acquaintance Principle (1793/2000: sect. 8). He also clearly distinguished the case of aesthetic testimony from other forms of testimony and expressed skepticism about the value of the former while affirming the value of the latter (1793/2000: sect. 32–3). And Kant’s view of the matter has been upheld by numerous aestheticians (e.g. Sibley 2001a; Scruton 1974; Tormey 1974; Pettit 1983; Mothersill 1984). It has seemed to all of these philosophers that we simply cannot gain aesthetic justification or knowledge without acquaintance of some sort or other. (For some dissenting views see Hopkins 2000; Budd 2003; Livingston 2003; Meskin 2004.) If they are right – if the acquaintance principle is correct – testimony will be unable to provide a basis for aesthetic judgment, let alone justified aesthetic judgment or aesthetic knowledge.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there are two puzzling features of aesthetic testimony. The alleged epistemic worthlessness of such testimony is the primary focus of this essay. But there is also the distinct psychological phenomenon to consider. Although we tend to accept what others tell us in a wide range of domains and contexts, we seem to resist forming aesthetic beliefs (or making aesthetic judgments) on the basis of others’ aesthetic testimony. While it is natural to think that the epistemic and psychological phenomena are linked, this is not mandatory.

So what explains these phenomena? How can we solve the puzzle of aesthetic testimony? I believe there are two serious candidates for solving the problem. But before I discuss the expressivist and unreliability approaches, it is worth exploring some other putative solutions.

## COLOR, VIRTUE, ERROR, AND RELATIVITY

It might be thought that the puzzle of aesthetic testimony could be dissolved by appeal to the broadly experiential or perceptual nature of the aesthetic domain. But this cannot be right. Ordinary testimony about color may well have epistemic value (e.g. you are typically entitled to believe me when I tell you the color of my house or car), and color is a paradigmatically perceptual phenomenon. Nor is it plausible the explanation lies in the fact that aesthetic discourse is concerned with values. As Wollheim and others have pointed out, moral testimony seems to have epistemic value in at least some circumstances (Wollheim 1980; Coady 1992: 69–75; Jones 1999).

It is natural, then, to explain the problem with aesthetic testimony by appeal to some distinctive ways aesthetic discourse may fail to meet the criteria for counting as fully realist in nature. There look to be three important anti-realist alternatives to consider: (1) aesthetic error theories, which hold that all substantive aesthetic judgments are false; (2) aesthetic relativism, which holds that the surface syntax of ordinary aesthetic judgment (and its apparent objectivity) is systematically misleading; and (3) aesthetic expressivism, which holds that aesthetic judgments do not count as true or false in any ordinary sense.

An aesthetic error theory would seem to have no trouble explaining the failure of aesthetic testimony to transmit justification or knowledge. If all substantive aesthetic claims were false, then there could be no substantive aesthetic justification or knowledge to transmit. It is true that such a view has not attracted many followers, although Mackie suggests that considerations in favor of an ethical error theory also support an aesthetic error theory (1977: 15). But the crucial point is that an aesthetic error theory attempts to solve the puzzle of aesthetic testimony by appeal to the non-existence of substantive aesthetic knowledge; that is, it explains the impossibility of testimonially acquired aesthetic knowledge (as opposed to testimonially acquired knowledge in other domains) by appeal to the impossibility of first-hand positive aesthetic knowledge. It fails then to meet an important constraint on any satisfactory account of the phenomena in question – *any satisfactory account of aesthetic judgment must explain the apparent asymmetry between the epistemic status of those who have had first-hand experience of objects of aesthetic interest and those who have had no such first-hand experience*. Since an aesthetic error theory cannot do this, it is an unattractive approach to solving the puzzle of aesthetic testimony.

If not an error theory, then perhaps aesthetic relativism. For if aesthetic discourse must be understood as implicitly relativized to cultures, subcultures, taste groups, or sensibilities, then there appears to be a natural

explanation for its epistemic weakness. The relativist suggests that A's claim that X is beautiful might not provide warrant for B's judgment that X is beautiful, since their judgments may have different truth conditions (if A and B belong to different cultures, subcultures, taste groups, etc.). Such a view does not suffer the problem facing aesthetic error theories – it has no problem meeting the asymmetry constraint described above, because it explains the puzzle of aesthetic testimony by appeal to interpersonal variation. Moreover, aesthetic relativism has quite a bit of intuitive appeal, and it is a well-entrenched view in philosophical aesthetics (e.g. Hume 1739–40/2000; Goldman 1995). But relativism faces its own problems in making sense of many features of ordinary aesthetic discourse. For example, a relativist view has trouble making sense of the appearance of robust disagreement between agents whose aesthetic utterances have radically different truth-conditions (e.g. because they belong to very different cultures). Perhaps more significantly, relativism could not, by itself, explain the complete epistemic worthlessness of aesthetic testimony. Consider a form of relativism which held that aesthetic judgments were always implicitly relativized to the culture to which the utterer belonged. In the first place, such a view could not (by itself) explain failures of aesthetic testimony to transmit warrant *within* cultures. For if it were possible that two agents could come to know that they belonged to the same culture, then relativism itself would do no work explaining the epistemic weakness of their aesthetic testimony vis-à-vis one another. Furthermore, although the truth of aesthetic relativism would explain why A cannot typically be justified in believing that X is beautiful (relative to C1) merely on the basis of B's testimony that X is beautiful (relative to C2), it would not altogether preclude the possibility of cross-cultural transmission of aesthetic justification or knowledge by means of testimony. For example, the relativist picture seems to allow that A may be justified in judging – purely on the basis of B's testimony – that X is beautiful with respect to whichever culture it is to which B is implicitly referring. And A may know that there is some *overlap* between C1 and C2, so that – in certain domains – B's testimony that X is beautiful (relative to C2) does, in fact, provide a reasonable basis for A's judging that X is beautiful (relative to C1).

Where does this leave us? If error theories and relativism both fail to make sense of the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony, then expressivism looks like the only live option. Furthermore, aesthetic expressivism looks to offer a natural solution to the problem of aesthetic testimony. If aesthetic judgments do not consist in beliefs, then there would appear to be an obvious explanation of the failure of testimony to transmit justification and knowledge. Let me say a bit more about the attraction of aesthetic expressivism.

## THE APPEAL OF THE EXPRESSIVIST SOLUTION

As C. A. J. Coady writes in the context of discussing moral testimony:

When I spoke of some of the motivations for returning a quick negative answer to the question about moral testimony as dubious, I had in mind various versions of what might be called ‘primitive emotivism.’ This is the meta-ethical theory which has it that all moral utterances (and indeed all value utterances) are no more than expressions and/or excitations of feeling. This would remove morality from the purview of testimony by removing moral utterances from the province of propositions altogether (1992: 69).

Similarly, if aesthetic judgments were nothing but the expression or excitation of feeling, then there would be no transmission of justification or knowledge by means of aesthetic testimony, since there would be, in fact, no aesthetic testimony. Moreover, it is not simply primitive emotivism that seems to hold out hope for explaining the failure of aesthetic testimony. A number of philosophers have suggested that more sophisticated versions of expressivism might also help solve the puzzle. For example, Philip Pettit claims that “what I seem to know when, having seen a painting, I describe it as graceful or awkward... is not something which you can know, or at least not something which you can know in the same sense, just through relying on my testimony” (1983: 25). And Pettit suggests that an expressivist “affective theory” may do the trick in explaining this phenomenon (although he does not, in fact, endorse such a theory):

The affective theorist... can make ready sense of it. He will say that one is fully entitled to assent to an aesthetic characterisation only where one has had a certain noncognitive experience in response to the work and that this naturally leads us to deny that there can be a non-perceptual title to full ‘knowledge’ of what the characterisation expresses. Just as one must be amused before one is fully entitled to describe a joke as funny – the opponents of realism will naturally take amusement as noncognitive – so it will be said that one must be moved in some noncognitive fashion, one must enjoy some appropriate noncognitive flush, before one has a full title to endorse an aesthetic characterisation (1983: 25–6).

There is no suggestion here that only a primitive aesthetic emotivism would be required to explain the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony. What is crucial here is that aesthetic judgments involve *some* non-cognitive element, although a cognitive component may be involved as well.

Although traditional emotivism cannot be considered a plausible theory of ethical or aesthetic discourse, it is worth considering the theory in light of the phenomena associated with aesthetic testimony. There are some important lessons to learn from this examination. So it is to aesthetic emotivism that we turn to next.

## **AESTHETIC EMOTIVISM AND AESTHETIC TESTIMONY**

Traditional emotivism was formulated primarily as a meta-ethical theory. Motivated in large part by worries about verification, A. J. Ayer argued that ethical utterances were simple expressions of approval and disapproval. But he also argued that aesthetic utterances were no different:

Aesthetic terms are used in exactly the same way as ethical terms. Such aesthetic words as 'beautiful' and 'hideous' are employed, as ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response (1952: 113–14).

As mentioned above, such a theory appears at first glance to offer a natural explanation of the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony. On this account, no propositions are expressed when aesthetic judgments are made, so there is no possibility of justified aesthetic judgment or aesthetic knowledge. Hence, the emotivist view entails that there can be no justified aesthetic judgment or knowledge transmitted by means of testimony.

This emotivist explanation of the problem with aesthetic testimony rests on the general denial of justified aesthetic judgment and aesthetic knowledge. But this generates a problem for the explanation. On the emotivist account, there does not appear to be a relevant asymmetry between the epistemic position of someone who has perceptual acquaintance with an object and someone who has only heard testimony about the object – neither can make a justified aesthetic judgment of the object, neither can possess aesthetic knowledge of the object. So the emotivist explanation fails for the very same reason that the aesthetic error theory fails – it fails to make sense of the master constraint spelled out above. While a blanket denial of the possibility of justified aesthetic judgment and aesthetic knowledge would explain the failure of aesthetic testimony, it cannot provide a satisfactory solution to the puzzle.

Furthermore, even the traditional emotivist attempts to offer an account of reason-giving in the normative domains. A typical emotivist account of normative reasons counts any normative statement as a reason if it

causes, is assumed to cause, or has the tendency to cause a change in normative views (Stevenson 1937). While this looks to be an implausible account of normative reason-giving (since it confuses brute causation with the normative dimension of reason-giving), it suggests that even primitive aesthetic emotivists – insofar as they are inclined to give any account of discourse about reasons in the aesthetic realm – may be pushed to admit that aesthetic testimony can provide a reason (of some sort) for making an aesthetic judgment.

Given these considerations, it looks like traditional aesthetic emotivism cannot provide a plausible explanation for the phenomena associated with aesthetic testimony. It fails to underwrite an epistemic asymmetry between one who has direct experience of an object and one who has only heard about it by testimony. Insofar as it attempts to make sense of reason-giving, it seems to allow that aesthetic testimony can provide reasons for aesthetic judgments. There are also independent reasons to think that ‘primitive’ forms of aesthetic emotivism are false (Kivy 1980, 1992; Zemach 1997: 1–22). This suggests that we should consider an important updated successor theory, which tries to answer many of the objections to traditional emotivism.

## **NORM-EXPRESSIVISM AND AESTHETIC TESTIMONY**

In *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, Alan Gibbard develops a sophisticated normative theory rooted in the insights of emotivism (1990). This norm-expressivist approach to normative discourse combines a form of sentimentalism with a fundamentally expressivist account of rationality. The approach is sentimentalist because it construes normative discourse as essentially about the affective attitudes. It is expressivist (or non-cognitivist) because it holds that this discourse makes ineliminable reference to what attitudes are rational and “to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact, either truly or falsely” (Gibbard 1990: 8). On this view, to judge that something is rational is not to describe; rather, it is to express a particular state of mind.

While Gibbard does not offer any substantive account of normative aesthetic discourse, it is clear that he believes that his general approach applies to the aesthetic domain as well as the ethical. He writes:

The various different kinds of norms governing a thing – moral norms, aesthetic norms, norms of propriety – are each norms for the rationality of some one kind of attitude one can have toward it. Just as moral



norms are norms for the rationality of guilt and resentment, so aesthetic norms are norms for the rationality of kinds of aesthetic appreciation (1990: 51–2).

Roughly speaking, then, the account is that to think that X is aesthetically good is to think that it is rational (or warranted) to appreciate X in some distinctive way. Such an account is an improvement over primitive emotivism, not least of all because it apparently has the resources to handle some of the most powerful challenges facing that theory (Geach 1958, 1965). But can the norm-expressivist solve the puzzle of aesthetic testimony?

At first glance, the norm-expressivist account might seem to share primitive emotivism's explanation for the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony. If aesthetic norms are norms for the rationality of aesthetic responses, and if norms of rationality are, strictly speaking, not truth-evaluable, then aesthetic justification and knowledge (at least as traditionally understood) seem precluded across the board. Hence, justification and knowledge based on aesthetic testimony are also precluded.

If this were all there is to the norm-expressivist position, its explanation of the weakness of aesthetic testimony would suffer from the same problem that primitive emotivism faces (namely, a failure to make sense of the asymmetry constraint). Furthermore, while the norm-expressivist view essentially links normative judgments with the sentiments, it is explicitly designed to allow for normative judgments in the absence of such sentiments. Consider Gibbard's analysis of moral judgments. Roughly speaking, to call an act wrong on his view is to express one's acceptance of norms that, *prima facie*, sanction guilt and resentment in response to that act (1990: 47). Neither guilt nor resentment need actually be felt. To use Pettit's language, one need not feel the "noncognitive flush" in order to make the relevant judgment. So aesthetic norm-expressivism would allow for normative judgments even in the absence of affective responses. (In fact, this might be seen as a virtue of the theory, as it enables it to make sense of our capacity to judge an art work as valuable without appreciating it ourselves.) The norm-expressivist then seems particularly ill-suited to explain the psychological phenomenon of our resistance to aesthetic testimonial uptake.

But there is a more significant problem with adapting Gibbard's norm-expressivism to solve the puzzle of aesthetic testimony. Traditional emotivism suffers from an inability to make sense of a wide range of normative discourse. For example, our normative discourse is shot through with talk of truth, justification, and knowledge. And many have pointed out that our normative statements seem to function in deductive reasoning (Geach 1958, 1965). Any plausible account of the normative domains needs to make sense of these phenomena. While traditional emotivism failed to

make sense of much of our ordinary normative thought and discourse, norm-expressivism attempts to explain and justify these phenomena. So (*pace* Todd 2004: 277), Gibbard's norm-expressivism is also a version of what Simon Blackburn calls "quasi-realism" (Blackburn 1984: 171, 180ff.). For example, Gibbard suggests a way of understanding knowledge claims in the normative realms (Gibbard 1990: 182). But this quasi-realist approach would seem to undercut the capacity of expressivism to explain the weakness of normative (and, hence, aesthetic) testimony, since that explanation rests on a rejection of the applicability of notions such as truth, justification, and knowledge (see Hopkins 2001 for additional discussion).

For example, Gibbard's discussion of normative authority suggests that the norm-expressivist can easily make sense of both testimonial uptake in the normative domains and a form of testimonial transmission of aesthetic warrant (1990: 174–88). In the first place, he points out that we may confront situations in which we have reason to believe that we share certain norms with a speaker. In such a case, one might treat that speaker's normative reasoning "as a proxy for one's own" (1990: 174) and form judgments solely on the basis of that testimony. Gibbard calls this an example of the workings of "contextual authority." "Socratic influence," on the other hand, is exhibited when a speaker causally influences one to accept a normative judgment without there being any assumption of authority. Both contextual authority and Socratic influence are clearly consistent with the norm-expressivist picture, and both are avenues by which aesthetic testimonial uptake may take place.

Gibbard goes further and argues that the norm-expressivist picture is also consistent with according "fundamental authority" to others, that is, with a willingness to trust (to a limited extent) the normative judgments of others even when there is no assumption of shared norms (1990: 179–81). Gibbard's arguments here mirror some very traditional arguments for the epistemic value of testimony – his fundamental contention is that there is pressure to trust in one's own normative judgments and this, in turn, puts pressure on one to recognize the legitimacy, at least under certain conditions, of the normative influence of others.

These arguments describe phenomena that the norm-expressivist must and can make sense of. We do seem to accord contextual and fundamental authority to others in normative domains, and any normative theory must make sense of this. But Gibbard is also making a normative point. He argues that we *ought* to accord others some degree of fundamental authority with respect to norms. There is no inconsistency here with the norm-expressivist picture – Gibbard is expressing his acceptance of higher-order norms that accord some degree of authority to the judgments of others. But this suggests

that norm-expressivism has the resources to explain why we are able to epistemically evaluate instances of normative testimonial uptake. Of course, norm-expressivism is also consistent with higher-order norms that reject the normative authority of others. But this just shows that norm-expressivism by itself cannot explain the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony.

It appears then that norm-expressivism is not a good candidate for solving the puzzle of aesthetic testimony. There are reasons to think that norm-expressivism itself is indeterminate with respect to the epistemology of normative testimony. On the norm-expressivist picture, the question of the value of aesthetic testimony is a matter of higher-order norms, which are themselves subject to norm-expressivist analyses.

Both primitive emotivism and norm-expressivism analyze normative and evaluative discourse (at least in part) in terms of affective states. But the expressivist need not appeal to affective states. We turn now to alternate versions of aesthetic expressivism – versions which hold other sorts of non-cognitive states to be central to aesthetic judgment. These views appear to fare better than emotivism and norm-expressivism in explaining the puzzling phenomena associated with aesthetic testimony.

## **EXPERIENTIALISM AND AESTHETIC TESTIMONY**

Although emotivism and its sentimentalist descendents are the most common forms of expressivism, the expressivist has a range of mental states from which to choose. Rather than analyzing aesthetic discourse in terms of the expression of approval, or the acceptance of norms for appreciation, the aesthetic expressivist may focus on mental states that cannot occur in the absence of direct experience of the object. The most straightforward proposal of this sort is that the non-cognitive component of aesthetic judgments is simply a perceptual state (that is, the judgment is – or involves – a certain perceptual experience), but the approach need not be committed to this. Let us call an account of this form ‘experientialism’ (e.g. Scruton 1974).

While experientialism about aesthetic discourse is well suited to explain the psychological and epistemological phenomena associated with aesthetic testimony, the solution is not without its difficulties. One question for expressivists of this type is whether they believe that aesthetic judgment requires synchronic occurrence of relevant perceptual experience. A positive answer is quite implausible – for example, it seems odd to think warranted aesthetic judgment of a painting requires that one be currently looking at it. It is hard to see how art criticism would work if that were the case. But if it is admitted that memory of a perceptual experience can suffice as a basis

for aesthetic judgment, then there is some pressure to allow that testimony based on another's perceptual experience may also be sufficient. (The idea here is that trusting one's past self is significantly analogous to trusting others.)

In addition, it is difficult to see any attraction to this position other than that it seems to explain the phenomena associated with aesthetic testimony. While traditional emotivism and norm-expressivism are motivated by a variety of concerns – worries about verification of normative claims, the existence of persistent disagreement in normative realms, intuitions of judgment internalism, and ontological parsimony – experientialism seems motivated solely (or almost solely) by its capacity to explain the Acquaintance Principle. So the attractiveness of this meta-aesthetic theory will be weakened considerably if a better explanation is made available. In the next section of this paper I offer just such an explanation.

### **AN ALTERNATE SOLUTION TO THE PUZZLE OF AESTHETIC TESTIMONY**

If there were no better solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, then it might be reasonable to advert to experientialism. But this is not the case; there is an appealing alternative which can explain the relevant psychological and epistemological phenomena. I will focus for the remainder of this paper on what I take to be the most plausible account of the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony, but I will also have a bit to say about the psychological phenomenon.

Before I lay out my account, it is worth reconsidering the phenomena in question. The puzzle of aesthetic testimony seemed to arise because of (1) the mismatch between the epistemic worthlessness of aesthetic testimony and the high epistemic value of much other testimony, and (2) the mismatch between our resistance to aesthetic testimonial uptake and our ordinary tendency to form beliefs on the basis of others' testimony. But I suspect that the relevant phenomena have been misdescribed. It is not that we *never* form aesthetic judgments on the basis of the testimony of others. For example, when we are confronted with the testimony of an art critic we know to be reliable, we may well be willing to make an evaluative aesthetic judgment on the basis of what they tell us. And it is not at all implausible that we sometimes form beliefs about the beauty of natural objects and landscapes on the basis of what we are told. That might explain some of our willingness to form vacation plans on the basis of testimony about natural beauty. Moreover, it is plausible that there are some cases (perhaps quite rare) when

we are warranted in making aesthetic judgments on the basis of aesthetic testimony. That is, while testimonially-acquired aesthetic justification and knowledge may be rare, they do seem possible.

Does this undercut my earlier arguments against the relativist solution? To some extent it does, although it is still the case that the cultural relativist – to focus on one common version of the view – faces the challenge of explaining intracultural failures of aesthetic testimony. And there are other problems with relativism (Meskin 2004: 80–4).

The account starts with an observation about the epistemology of testimony: all non-skeptical parties to the debate agree that not all testimony is of equal epistemic value. For example, insincere and intentionally deceptive testimony may fail to provide justification and knowledge. The same is true with regard to the testimony of those who are not competent to judge in a particular domain. Of course reductivists about the epistemology of testimony are committed to its differential epistemic value. Induction may support the belief that a given testifier is an unreliable source of information, just as it may support the belief that the testifier is reliable. And justified belief in the unreliability of an agent surely undermines our capacity to gain justification by means of his testimony. But even non-reductivists about the epistemology of testimony will treat the testimony of incompetent judges differently from that of competent ones. If (as is plausible) reliability is a necessary condition for epistemic justification, then incompetence and unreliability will preclude testimonially-based justification.

My proposal is that unreliability in the aesthetic realm explains the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony (Meskin 2004). A long tradition in aesthetics suggests that most ordinary aesthetic testimony is likely to be unreliable. Consider, for example, Hume's discussion of the relative scarcity of true judges: "Thus, though the principles of taste be universal... yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art... . Under some or other... imperfections, the generality of men labour; and, hence, a true judge of the finer arts is observed... to be so rare a character" (Hume 1757/1987: 241).

The benefits of explaining the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony in terms of unreliability are significant. Perhaps the most significant advantage of this approach over its competition is that it explains the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony without denying its value altogether. That is, the unreliability account has the resources to explain why aesthetic testimony can provide justification in certain cases. For while aesthetic testimony may be largely unreliable, it is plausible that there are conditions under which it is reliable – perhaps when the testimony expresses the "joint verdict" of "true judges." The reductivist about testimonial justification can allow that, in circumstances where we do have positive inductive

evidence of the reliability of an aesthetic judge, we may gain justification, and even knowledge, on the basis of that judge's testimony. The non-reductivist may simply allow that certain forms of aesthetic testimony are reliable, and hence allow for the transmission of justification by testimony in those cases.

What about our resistance to aesthetic testimonial uptake? The unreliability theorist may appeal to two factors that underwrite our resistance to forming aesthetic judgments on the basis of what others tell us. The most obvious point to make is that widespread unreliability does not go unnoticed. So some of our resistance to testimonial uptake in the aesthetic realm can be explained by appeal to the fact that we recognize that others often fail to meet the requirements for being true judges. Another factor is the widespread existence of folk relativism and folk subjectivism. A person who believes that beauty really is in the eye of the beholder will be unlikely to trust the aesthetic judgments of others. So the unreliability theorist has ready explanations of both the epistemic and psychological phenomena that characterize the puzzle of aesthetic testimony. Nonetheless, the reader may have some worries about the approach.

## **ASYMMETRY AND THE UNRELIABILITY EXPLANATION**

The epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony stems from the fact that the process of forming aesthetic beliefs on the basis of others' testimony is not a particularly reliable one – it does not tend to produce a high proportion of true beliefs. My explanation for this phenomenon appeals to the robust requirements (cognitive, affective, and perceptual) for being an accurate judge of beauty and aesthetic value – especially in the artistic domain. These robust requirements often fail to be met by those who offer aesthetic testimony.

This explanation might seem to be in tension with earlier criticisms I made of both the aesthetic error theory and aesthetic emotivism. I suggested that a problem with their explanations of the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony was that they fail to make sense of the first-hand/second-hand asymmetry with respect to the epistemology of aesthetic judgment; that is, they offer explanations of aesthetic testimony's failure to transmit justification and knowledge which rest on a blanket denial of the existence of aesthetic justification and knowledge. Yet my explanation appears to suffer from the same problem – it does not seem to underwrite any epistemic difference between aesthetic judgments made on the basis of testimony and

those made on the basis of direct interaction with the work itself. For the agent who is directly confronted with a work of art is not, in principle, in any better position with respect to meeting the requirements for being a true judge than the agent who supplies testimony about that work of art. Does the unreliability explanation, then, fail the master constraint? I do not believe so.

There is an important asymmetry to which the unreliability explanation can appeal. It is plausible that an agent is much more likely to know the extent to which he or she meets the requirements for being a true judge than the extent to which another person meets those requirements. Consider some of the factors that are plausibly relevant to being a true judge of a work of art – art-historical and art-theoretical knowledge, experience with the particular genre or style category that the work falls into, knowledge of the categorial intentions the artist had with respect to the work, knowledge of the artist's oeuvre, and the ability to avoid anachronistic interpretation. We are much more likely to know whether (and when) we possess these attributes than whether a testifier does. While this, in itself, does not make any particular autonomous judgment we make more likely to be accurate than one formed on the basis of testimony, it does suggest that we may be in a better position with respect to determining whether and when we should trust our own aesthetic judgments than we are with respect to determining whether and when to trust aesthetic testimony.

The defender of the unreliability solution may also be tempted to appeal to the distinctive unreliability of aesthetic testimony itself. That is, it is plausible that aesthetic testimony (as opposed to mere aesthetic judgment) suffers from a special epistemic problem. Consider the importance of sincerity to the general reliability and epistemic value of testimony. When sincerity is missing – and deception is rampant – testimony lacks epistemic value. But the aesthetic domain, which plays an important role in the establishment of social status, is one where the presence of sincerity seems always open to question. If sincerity really is at issue in the aesthetic domain, then forming judgments on the basis of aesthetic testimony might be a less reliable process than simply forming aesthetic judgments directly. Some first-hand/second-hand asymmetry may be explained this way.

It is also possible that people tend to over-estimate their own aesthetic expertise. If so, there would be a natural explanation for why people trust their own aesthetic judgments more than the aesthetic testimony of others. Of course this would not explain why they *ought* to trust their own judgments more than those of others. It would not explain any epistemic asymmetry at all. But it would go some way towards explaining why people are inclined to think that there is an epistemic asymmetry.

## BUT IS IT TESTIMONY?

Coady (1992: 42) argues that it is a necessary condition on testimony that the putative testifier be competent in the relevant domain. The unreliability account explains the epistemic weakness of aesthetic testimony by appeal to widespread incompetence. So the unreliability account seems to have a problem – if it is correct that there is a great deal of aesthetic unreliability, then there will, in fact, be very little aesthetic testimony. More to the point, if the epistemic weakness of a piece of putative testimony is explained by the incompetence of the speaker, then such an utterance will not count as testimony. The unreliability account undercuts its own explanation – it cannot explain the epistemic problem with aesthetic *testimony*.

Two things can be said in response. The first is that even if Coady were right, the unreliability account would still have the resources to explain why we do not typically gain aesthetic justification or knowledge from the utterances of others. Whether or not this need be understood in terms of testimony is irrelevant. The second point is that Coady's claim looks to be false. Testimony does not require competence – it requires only that the utterer intends her audience to believe that she is competent (Graham 1997). So the unreliability account need not fear undercutting itself.

A Humean-inspired account of the weakness of aesthetic testimony, rooted in an assumption of widespread aesthetic unreliability, is the most plausible approach to solving the puzzle of aesthetic testimony. Moreover, such an unreliability account is consistent with full-fledged aesthetic realism; hence it serves to undermine a distinctive argument for aesthetic anti-realism. Aesthetic realism may face other significant challenges, but the puzzle of aesthetic testimony should not impel us to give up on the reality and objectivity of aesthetic value.

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## Chapter 9

### CRITICAL COMPATIBILISM

James Shelley

1. What is the distinction between particularism and generalism in aesthetics? I hope to convince you that the answer to this question is harder to come by than we have thought. Particularism, whatever it is, is thought to have received its classic articulation in Arnold Isenberg's 1949 essay, "Critical Communication." Generalism, whatever it is, is thought to have received its classic articulation in Frank Sibley's 1983 essay, "General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics" (2001c). So if we wish to understand what particularism and generalism are, these are the essays to which we should turn.

2. Isenberg offers definitions of neither particularism nor generalism; nor does he refer to his position as 'particularist.' (Sibley seems to have been the first to apply the terms 'particularist' and 'generalist' to theories of criticism.) The theory of criticism he develops in his essay, however, he develops in contrast to another, which he describes as "widely held in spite of its deficiencies," and which he characterizes as dividing the critical process into three parts: "There is the value judgment or *verdict* (V): 'This picture or poem is good –.' There is a particular statement or *reason* (R): '– because it has such-and-such quality –.' And there is a general statement or *norm* (N): '– and any work which has that quality is *pro tanto* good'" (1949: 330). The point of contrast between the "widely held" theory and Isenberg's, according to which we may now aptly refer to the former as 'generalist' and the latter as 'particularist,' concerns N. According to the former theory, reason R functions as a premise (or something very like a premise) from which verdict V may be inferred (or something very like inferred). But since V does not follow from R simply, the widely held theory

must posit a tacit appeal to a general principle, N, which links the quality specified in R with the value specified in V. According to Isenberg's theory, R functions not as a premise for V but as a guide to a perception of the work that allows for the value specified in V to be grasped directly. Since on this view it is an act of perception that mediates R and V, as opposed to an inference (or something very like one), there is simply no role for N to play.

So if there are definitions of particularism and generalism to be derived from Isenberg's essay, they take something like following forms:

Particularism is the view that in criticism no appeal is made to general principles.

Generalism is the view that in criticism appeal is made to general principles.

3. Sibley, by contrast, offers a fairly explicit definition of particularism and, by extension, of generalism:

Throughout his writings Beardsley has steadily fought to uphold the view that in criticism there are and can be general reasons for aesthetic judgments. On this point I stand and have always stood on the same side as he does. Thus, basically, we face together those many writers over several decades – I dub them 'particularists' – who have argued that in criticism there are no such general reasons (2001c: 104).

We may say, then, that Sibley defines particularism and generalism as follows:

Particularism is the view that there are no general reasons in criticism.

Generalism is the view that there are general reasons in criticism.

But these definitions tell us little unless we know what it is for a reason to be general, and on this point Sibley says only that general reasons "must have a consistency about them" (2001c: 104). This in turn tells us little unless we have some idea what it is for a reason to have a consistency about it, and on this point Sibley says nothing. Our only recourse is to consult the text for examples of the sort of thing he has in mind. I find three such examples. The first is the strong form of consistency adopted by Beardsley, according to which a reason is general only if the quality it specifies counts in one direction, as either merit or defect, in every circumstance. But Sibley worries that to opt for such a strong form of consistency is to play into the particularist's hand, since there is no quality that is a merit in one work that

may not be a defect in some other, and vice versa. So Sibley introduces a second, weaker form of consistency. Though no quality, citable as a reason, is everywhere a merit or defect, certain qualities, citable as reasons, have inherent positive or negative tendencies or 'polarities.' The qualities having such inherent polarities are those whose *tout court* attribution to works implies merit or defect. Examples include: elegance, gracefulness, and tragic intensity on the positive side; garishness, sentimentality, and bombast on the negative.

But to say that these qualities have inherent polarities is of course to acknowledge that the polarities can be reversed under the right conditions. And I claim that this "reversibility phenomenon" (Sibley 2001c: 110) forces Sibley to acknowledge a third and yet weaker form of consistency. For consider those aesthetic judgments involving polarity reversals – judgments to the effect that works are so much the better or worse because they have inherently negative or positive qualities whose polarities have been reversed. Are there general reasons to be given on behalf of such judgments? To answer in the negative is to concede a bit of territory to particularism. It is to concede that particularism is true, so to speak, with respect to judgments involving polarity reversals. And perhaps it is to concede more, since if we get by without appeal to general reasons in polarity-reversed cases, why not suppose we always get by without them? It is to head off such worries, I conjecture, that Sibley answers (or seems to answer) the above question in the affirmative. This comes out, I think, in the following: "But if the critic does decide that the comic elements are defects in this work, a *perfectly general reason* can be given. A work that might otherwise have excelled by its tragic intensity is marred by certain (inherently valuable) comic elements that dilute and weaken that (inherently valuable) tragic intensity" (Sibley 2001c: 108, my italics).

The critic can give a general reason for the judgment that the inherently valuable comic elements have had their polarity reversed, which in turn allows him to give a general reason for the judgment that the work is so much the worse because of its inherently valuable comic elements. But whatever consistency this general reason has about it, it cannot be Beardsleyan one-way-always consistency, since that is the sort of consistency had by reasons that cite qualities whose polarities cannot be reversed. And it cannot be Sibleyan inherent-polarity consistency, since that is the sort of consistency had by reasons that cite qualities whose polarities have not been reversed. What sort of consistency is it, then? Sibley does not say, but perhaps he has in mind what might be called 'relevant-similarity' consistency (or perhaps 'universalizability' consistency). When you judge that a work is so much the worse because of its comic elements, you do not commit yourself to the

principle that any work having comic elements is so much worse, nor do you commit yourself to the principle that any work having comic elements is so much the worse unless the polarity of the comic elements has been reversed. But you plausibly do commit yourself to the principle that any work having comic elements in relevantly similar circumstances (i.e. circumstances in which those comic elements dilute tragic intensity, and in which tragic intensity matters more than the comic elements, and so on) is so much the worse. If this sort of consistency is sufficient to confer generality on reasons having it about them, then even reasons citing polarity-reversed qualities will qualify as general.

4. Sibley's definitions can now be lined up against their Isenbergian counterparts:

Isenbergian Particularism (IP) is the view that in criticism no appeal is made to general principles.

Sibleyan Particularism (SP) is the view that in criticism there are no general reasons.

Isenbergian Generalism (IG) is the view that in criticism appeal is made to general principles.

Sibleyan Generalism (SG) is the view that in criticism there are general reasons.

There are two obvious differences between the Isenbergian and Sibleyan distinctions: one is that the Isenbergian distinction concerns principles whereas the Sibleyan one concerns reasons; the other is that the Isenbergian distinction concerns what there is appeal to, whereas the Sibleyan one concerns what there is. In light of these differences you may rightly wonder whether the two distinctions are logically equivalent. They are not. You can infer back and forth between the existence of general principles and the existence of general rules, since the generality that a principle articulates just is the generality that a reason has. But while you can infer from what there is appeal to to what there is, you cannot infer from what there is to what there is appeal to. This means that while SP does entail IP, and while IG does entail SG, IP does not entail SP, nor does SG entail IG. That there are no general reasons in criticism (SP) entails that there are no general principles in criticism, and this entails that we do not appeal to general principles in criticism (IP). That we appeal to general principles in criticism (IG) entails that there are general principles, which entails that there are general reasons (SG). But that we do not appeal to general principles in criticism (IP) does not entail that there are no general principles in criticism, and so does not entail that there are no general reasons in criticism

(SP). And while the claim that there are general reasons in criticism (SG) entails that there are general principles in criticism, the claim that there are general principles in criticism does not entail that they are appealed to in criticism (IG).

It may seem, however, that there is an easy way to patch up the failed entailments from IP to SP and from SG to IG. The problem has been that we have been unable to overcome the gap between what there is and what there is appeal to. And it may seem that we can remove this gap simply by reformulating the Sibleyan definitions such that they concern not what there is but what there is appeal to. For it is not as if Sibley is committed merely to the existence of general reasons to which, for all we know, appeal is never made. He is committed to the generality of reasons to which appeal is made. So there is no harm in re-working his definitions as follows:

SG\* is the view that in criticism appeal is made to general reasons.

SP\* is the view that in criticism no appeal is made to general reasons.

But inferences from IP to SP\* and from SG\* to IP will still fail, if not for the same reason. The problem now is that while you can infer from the claim that *there are* general reasons to the claim that *there are* general principles, you cannot infer from the claim that *we appeal* to general reasons to the claim that *we appeal* to general principles. You can appeal only to that to which you have cognitive access, and you can have cognitive access to a reason that is general without having cognitive access to the principle that articulates that generality. So the claim that in criticism appeal is made to general reasons (SG\*) does not entail the claim that in criticism appeal is made to general principles (IG). Nor of course does the claim that in criticism no appeal is made to general principles (IP) entail the claim that in criticism no appeal is made to general reasons (SP\*).

I see no reason to believe that IP, the particularism Isenberg sets out to defend, and SG, the generalism that Sibley sets out to defend, are incompatible. Indeed I think they are compatible. Indeed, I think they are both true.

5. *Critical compatibilism*, the view that IP and SG are both true, will have two chief competitors: *strong particularism*, the view that both forms of particularism, IP and SP, are true, and *strong generalism*, the view that both forms of generalism, SG and IG, are true. To my knowledge, every defender of particularism is, as a matter of fact, a strong particularist (Mothersill 1961, 1984; Cohen 1998) and every defender of generalism is, as a matter

of fact, a strong generalist (Beardsley 1962; Dickie 1988; Bender 1995; Conolly and Haydar 2003). That Isenberg should be a strong particularist and Sibley a strong generalist may come as a surprise, given that the former merely sets out to defend IP and the latter merely sets out to defend SG. But each, by his essay's end, and in almost parallel fashion, seems driven to defend the other variant of the theory he holds.

Why ought we prefer compatibilism to its rivals? Here I will attempt only the beginnings of an answer by appealing to an expanded version of what Isenberg calls "the critical process:"

- S<sub>1</sub>: W<sub>1</sub> is good. (verdict or judgment)
- S<sub>2</sub>: Why? What makes it so? (reason-request)
- S<sub>1</sub>: Because W<sub>1</sub> has Q<sub>1</sub>. (reason)
- S<sub>2</sub>: But W<sub>2</sub> also has Q<sub>1</sub> and is not made better for having it. (consistency-challenge)
- S<sub>1</sub>: (1) Yes, but W<sub>1</sub> also has Q<sub>2</sub>, which W<sub>2</sub> lacks. (refinement)
- (2) Yes, but W<sub>2</sub> also has Q<sub>2</sub>, which W<sub>1</sub> lacks. (refinement)

I hope you discern, in the above, a pattern to which many critical conversations patently conform and to which perhaps many others arguably do. For convenience, I will divide it into the three stages: (1) the verdict; (2) the reason-stage, in which a reason is requested and given; and (3) the consistency-stage, in which the reason is apparently challenged on the grounds that it is inconsistent with other reasons that have been or ought to be given, and in which a refinement of the reason is offered in response.

My aim in enumerating these stages is not to suggest that critical conversations invariably pass through all three and in order. I doubt they even tend to. The reason- and consistency-stage can each be found to be unnecessary. Each can also be found to be insufficient and hence in need of repetition. What then determines which course a conversation takes through these stages? Much is determined by the character of the quality (Q<sub>1</sub>), which is cited as a reason for the verdict. Suppose S<sub>1</sub> gives a reason citing a comparatively evaluative quality – elegance, for example. The chances are almost none that S<sub>2</sub> will issue a consistency-challenge (unless, of course, the work is held to be *bad* because elegant, in which case S<sub>2</sub> will almost certainly issue a consistency-challenge). But the chances are comparatively high that S<sub>2</sub> will treat such a reason as if it were yet another verdict, standing in need of a reason of its own. If so, there will be another pass through the reason-stage in which S<sub>2</sub> this time asks what is it that makes the work elegant and in which S<sub>1</sub> gives a new reason citing some new, and presumably less evaluative, quality.

Suppose, by contrast, that  $S_1$  gives a reason citing a comparatively descriptive quality – possession of a wavelike contour, for example. Now the chances are almost none that  $S_2$  will treat this as yet another verdict – here the question ‘what makes it have a wavelike contour?’ (meant in the same sense as ‘what makes it good?’) borders on unintelligibility. But the chances are now higher that  $S_2$  will be unable to find her way from the wavelike contour to the goodness. If she is unable, there will likely be another pass through the reason-stage in which  $S_2$  this time asks how it is that the wavelike contour makes the work good and in which  $S_1$  gives a new reason citing some new, and presumably more evaluative, quality mediating the wavelike contour and the goodness. The chances are also now higher that  $S_2$  will issue a consistency-challenge, since the more descriptive the quality, the easier it will be to spot apparent inconsistencies between the reason citing it and other reasons  $S_1$  has given or ought to be prepared to give. If  $S_2$  does issue a consistency-challenge,  $S_1$  will offer a refinement of the reason that seems calculated to demonstrate, not that the reason is consistent with other reasons that have been or ought to be given, but rather that it is not inconsistent, in the way the challenge specifies, with other reasons that have been or ought to be given. (So, ‘consistency-stage’ is perhaps a misnomer: ‘not-inconsistency-stage’ is more accurate.) It is because  $S_1$ ’s refinement aims at demonstrating no more than this that the possibility of a second consistency-stage remains open, should inconsistencies become apparent between  $S_1$ ’s now refined reason and other reasons  $S_1$  has given or ought to be prepared to give. In this manner the consistency-stage may be repeated any number of times within a single conversation, the reason increasing in refinement each time.

The reason for preferring compatibilism to its rivals can now be given: compatibilism makes better sense of the whole of the critical process than does either of its rivals. We ought to prefer compatibilism to strong generalism because it makes better sense of the reason-stage. We ought to prefer compatibilism to strong particularism because it makes better sense of the consistency-stage. Moreover, the sense compatibilism makes of one stage is only clarified by the sense it makes of the other.

6. If strong generalism is true, then IG is true. If IG is true then  $S_1$ , in offering ‘ $W_1$  is  $Q_1$ ’ as reason, must be counting on  $S_2$  to make tacit appeal to a general principle linking the quality to the goodness  $S_1$ ’s verdict attributes to the work, and then to make an inference (or something like one), from that reason and that principle to that verdict. But to the degree that the quality is evaluative, it becomes difficult to see how  $S_2$  could have

need for such a principle. And to the degree that the quality is descriptive, it becomes difficult to see how  $S_2$  could have access to such a principle.

If we suppose the quality to be evaluative – elegance, for example – then there are two cases to consider, according to the kind of generality we suppose the reason has. We may suppose it to have what I have called Beardsleyan generality, in which case the principle will state that any work having elegance is so much the better. Or we may suppose it to have what I have called Sibleyan generality, in which case the principle will state that any work having elegance is so much the better unless the elegance has suffered a polarity reversal. If we suppose the reason to have Beardsleyan generality, then presumably this is because we suppose elegance to be a kind of goodness. But if elegance is a kind of goodness, then to judge that the work is elegant is to judge that it is good, just as to judge that the work is red is to judge that it is colored. But if to judge that the work is elegant is to judge that it is good, then to accept the reason is to accept the verdict, and there remains nothing for an appeal to a general principle to accomplish. If we suppose the reason to have Sibleyan generality, then an appeal to the principle picking out this generality will serve to link the reason and the verdict only if  $S_2$  also has been able to judge that in this work elegance has not had its positive polarity reversed. But to judge that in this work elegance has not had its positive polarity reversed is presumably to judge that in this work elegance is good. But if  $S_2$  has already judged that in this work elegance is good, then there again remains nothing for an appeal to a general principle to accomplish.

If, by contrast, we suppose the quality to be descriptive – possession of a wavelike contour, for example – then it will seem that the general principle to which  $S_2$  must appeal will be easily countered: there will be many works having a wavelike contour that are not made so much the better for having it. It may seem that we can calm this worry by allowing the principle to be as complicated as is necessary to safeguard it from counterexamples. But the worry now will be that the degree of complication necessary to place the principle beyond threat of counterexample will surely also place it beyond  $S_2$ 's cognitive reach.

So I think that something like Isenberg's positive account of what I am now calling the reason-stage has to be right.  $S_1$ 's reason functions not as a premise but as a guide to a perception of the work that allows the truth of the verdict to be grasped non-inferentially. The degree to which the quality  $S_1$  cites as a reason is evaluative or descriptive will depend, in part at least, on what sort of difficulty  $S_1$  expects  $S_2$  will most likely encounter in finding her way to the work's goodness. The advantage in citing an evaluative quality is that the distance between it and the goodness, so to speak, is



narrow – chances are comparatively slim that  $S_2$  will find her way to the elegance without finding her way to the goodness; the disadvantage in citing an evaluative quality is that chances are comparatively high that  $S_2$  will have difficulty finding her way to the elegance. The advantage and disadvantage in citing a descriptive quality are the inverse: chances are comparatively slim that  $S_2$  will have difficulty finding her way to the wavelike contour, but comparatively high that she will find the wavelength contour without finding the goodness. (I should add, however, that if there is as much truth in Isenberg's account of critical communication as I believe there to be, then much of what I have just said will require qualification.)

7. If strong particularism is true, then SP is true. If SP is true, then the reasons to which we appeal in criticism are not general. But if the reasons to which we appeal in criticism are not general, then one reason cannot be inconsistent with another. And if one reason cannot be inconsistent with another, then the portion of the critical process I have been calling the 'consistency-stage' will have to be explained away, either as an empty exercise or as one whose aims are not what they seem. So unless some strong particularist can provide an account explaining away the consistency-stage that is as compelling as an account that takes it at face value, we have reason to reject SP.

Has any strong particularist provided such an account? I believe not. Consider the account that Isenberg – who unfortunately embraces SP – gives of the consistency-stage. While acknowledging that the consistency-stage occupies "hundreds of pages of our best modern critics," he rejects it as "a waste of time and space:"

You have, perhaps, a conflict of opinion about the merits of a poem; and one writer defends his judgment by mentioning vowel sounds, metrical variations, consistent or inconsistent imagery. Another critic, taking that language at its face value in ordinary communication, points out that 'by those standards' one would have to condemn famous passages in *Hamlet* or *Lear* and raise some admittedly bad poems to a high place. . . . This procedure, which takes up hundreds of pages of our best modern critics, is a waste of time and space; for it is the critic abandoning his own function to pose as a scientist – to assume, in other words, that criticism explains experiences instead of clarifying and altering them. If he saw that the *meaning* of a word like 'assonance' – the quality it leads our perception to discriminate in one poem or another – is in critical usage never twice the same he would see no point in 'testing' any generalization about the relationship between assonance and poetic value (1949: 338–9).

I want to grant much of what Isenberg says in this passage. I want to grant the distinction between ordinary and critical communication. I want to grant the claim that the illusion of an inconsistency across reasons might arise – perhaps sometimes does – because of a crossing up of these two forms of communication. But I see no reason to grant the claim that “the *meaning* of a word like ‘assonance’... is in critical usage never twice the same.” A word like ‘assonance’ is a word that refers to the quality that a reason cites. So to say that the meaning of such a word is never twice the same is to say that no two critical reasons cite the same quality. But if no two critical reasons cite the same quality then there can be no inconsistency across critical reasons.

But why believe that “the *meaning* of a word like ‘assonance’... is in critical usage never twice the same”? This claim does not seem to follow from Isenberg’s distinction between ordinary and critical communication. Communication is critical, according to that distinction, only if the meaning it transmits is “‘filled in,’ ‘rounded out,’ or ‘completed’ by the act of perception” (Isenberg 1949: 336); otherwise communication is ordinary. It follows that any critical utterance will transmit a meaning of greater particularity than will its ordinary counterpart since to ‘fill in,’ ‘round out,’ or ‘complete’ a meaning is to particularize it. But that any critical utterance will transmit a meaning of greater particularity than will its ordinary counterpart does not imply that any critical utterance will transmit a meaning of absolute and utter particularity: that the meaning of a word like ‘assonance’ is more particular in critical than in ordinary usage does not imply that the meaning of such a word is in critical usage never twice the same. Nor can I see that such a view follows from any other element of Isenberg’s theory of criticism. I can only conjecture that Isenberg believes, wrongly, that it follows from IP, perhaps because he believes that it does follow from SP, and either believes that SP follows from IP or fails to distinguish between them.

Until the strong particularist at least explains why she need not be able to explain the consistency-stage, we have reason to dismiss strong particularism in favor of any theory of critical reasons able to explain it.

8. Suppose I am granted that if we consider the reason- and consistency-stages in isolation from one another, then we have reason to prefer compatibilism to strong generalism and to strong particularism. From this it will not follow that we have reason to prefer compatibilism to strong generalism or to strong particularism. For – as the strong generalist and strong particularist may for once agree – the elements constituting strong generalism and strong particularism make sense in combination in a way the elements

constituting compatibilism do not. In affirming SG, compatibilism requires generality in the reasons to which we appeal in criticism. But in affirming IP, it seems to deny to those reasons the only function to which generality could have any relevance. If critical reasons function not as premises but merely as perceptual guides, why should it matter whether they are general? The answer is that while critical reasons function as perceptual guides, it is *as reasons* that they do so, and, as Sibley rightly says, “reasons, to be reasons must have a consistency about them” (2001c: 104).

I will attempt to explain how it is that a critical reason is at once a reason and a guide to perception by invoking a pair of distinctions. The first is the distinction between doing something in justification of a belief and giving a justificatory reason. Suppose I wish to justify to you my belief that we have mustard on hand. I may remind you that you yourself bought some last week; I may direct you to open the refrigerator and look on the bottom shelf, behind the horseradish; I may open the refrigerator myself and produce the mustard for your inspection. In each case I do what I do in justification of my belief, but only in the first do I give a justificatory reason, since only in the first do I intend the content of what I say (in combination with certain tacit assumptions I count on you to make) to do the justifying. The second distinction is the familiar one between a justificatory reason and an explanatory reason. If I am asked why I believe we have mustard on hand when what is in question is *not why but whether* we have it, I am likely to offer a justificatory reason: ‘because you yourself bought some last week.’ But if I am asked why I believe we have mustard on hand when what is in question is *not whether but why* we have it on hand, I will offer an explanatory reason: ‘because we were going to be grilling.’

Now take the reason  $S_1$  gives in justification of her verdict that  $W_1$  is good: ‘because  $W_1$  has  $Q_1$ .’ There is no disputing that it is a reason that she gives, nor that her giving of it is something she does in justification of her verdict. So it may seem as if  $S_1$ ’s reason must be justificatory, particularly if you also consider that what is in question is not why but whether the work is good. But if the arguments given against IG in section 6 go through,  $S_1$ ’s reason cannot be justificatory – there is simply no justificatory burden that her reason can be presumed to be carrying.

So if  $S_1$ ’s reason is a reason, and not a mere guide to perception, it must be explanatory. That it is an explanatory reason gains support from the kind of consistency we seem to be demanding in the consistency-stage: the consistency we demand across critical reasons looks very much like the consistency we demand across explanatory reasons. A critical reason you have given may be challenged on the grounds that it is inconsistent with other critical reasons you have given or ought to be prepared to give; a

challenge to a critical reason you have given may be answered by your offering a refinement of that reason. If you have claimed that *The Burial of Count Orgaz* is good because of a wavelike contour, and have been challenged on the grounds that other paintings have wavelike contours and are not good, you may answer that challenge by noting a relevant difference between *The Burial* and the other paintings. But this is just what we ought to expect if critical reasons are explanatory reasons. An explanatory reason you have given may be challenged on the grounds that it is inconsistent with other explanatory reasons you have given or ought to be prepared to give; a challenge to an explanatory reason you have given may be answered by your offering a refinement of that reason. If you have claimed that the Roman Empire fell because of internal dissent, and have been challenged on the grounds that other empires have housed internal dissent and have not fallen, you may answer that challenge by noting a relevant difference between the Roman Empire and the others. In both cases the reason you give is general. In both cases your giving of the reason commits you to the principle that picks that generality out. But in neither case need you be able to articulate the principle, as you would were the reason justificatory.

But what sense can we make of an explanatory reason being given in justification of a verdict? If what  $S_2$  wishes to know is *whether*  $W_1$  is good, why should she be told *why*  $W_1$  is good? The answer is perhaps obvious by now. To be told why  $W_1$  is good just is to be told what makes it good, and to be told what makes it good it also to be told where its goodness may be found.

9. So Isenberg was right: we do not appeal to general principles in justification of critical verdicts. And Sibley was right: we do appeal to general reasons in justification of critical verdicts. And any account of critical reasons that allows both Isenberg and Sibley to be right is *pro tanto* good.

## Chapter 10

# CRITICAL REASONING AND CRITICAL PERCEPTION

Robert Hopkins

## TWO INSIGHTS

An old issue in aesthetics concerns the nature of critical debate. On one side are those who see critical discussion as a form of argument like any other. In defending a critical judgment, be it of nature or art, we appeal to what Kant (who rejected the idea) called ‘principles of taste.’ These are general claims to the effect that anything possessing some feature F thereby, or at least to that extent, possesses a different feature G, where this second feature is of aesthetic interest. We can then argue that the object under discussion is G on the basis of both this general principle and the claim that the object is F (Beardsley 1962, 1969; Dickie 2006). The opponents of this view have usually made two claims in response. They have denied that there are any principles of taste from which aesthetic conclusions could be informatively derived. But they have also made a positive claim about what critical debate involves, that its purpose is to bring one’s audience to see the object in a certain way. There are no critical arguments, if that means deductive reasoning from general claims, for no such claims are available. In any case, the point of critical discussion is not the formation of belief, but the engendering of perception (e.g. Isenberg 1949; Hampshire 1970; Strawson 1974; Sibley 2001*a*, 2001*b*; Mothersill 1984).

In my view, each side to this debate grasps an insight. The proper outcome of critical discussion is indeed a perception, and to that extent I condone the second position. But the first position also seeks to preserve a very appealing thought, namely that critical discussion is a rational activity – it

counts as a form of argument, or reasoning. No doubt the proponents of this view were mistaken to construe its rationality as deduction from general principles. But perhaps they were driven to do so because they could not see how otherwise to preserve the rational status of critical discourse. Certainly their opponents can do little to accommodate this status. As they construe matters, the heart of critical discussion is the activity of pointing out features of the object to one's audience, with a wider penumbra of other actions one might perform to convey one's point, such as making comparisons and contrasts, or appealing to metaphors. But pointing out is not reasoning; it does not take the listener from what she already accepts to a conclusion she doubts. Rather, it is to direct the attention of one's companion so that her experience reveals one of the object's features to her. And the other activities this view makes available to the critic, whatever their benefits, have even less claim to count as appeals to rational connections. Thus it is a serious question whether the advocates of critical perception can make sense of the idea of critical reasoning. For anyone sympathetic to both insights, it matters little whether there are 'principles of taste' sufficient to drive deductive arguments. The deeper issue is how to reconcile the rationality of critical discourse with its leading to perception. How can there be an argument with a perception as its conclusion?

Although much of the debate over principles of taste missed the fact that this is the issue at its core, at least some writers have addressed the problem. Frank Sibley, for one, sees the apparent tension. In "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic" his response is to abandon the first insight: "an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called *reasoning*" (2001a: 40). He then devotes the paper to saying what the activity of critical discussion could be, *given that* it could not be reasoning in the sense the first insight requires. He does so by exploring the relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic *properties*. Much of the debate over the possibility of critical reasons has taken the same line. My hope in what follows is to make progress where Sibley gives up. I explore the relations between the notions of perception and reason, leaving out of account any relations in the world which critical reasoning might exploit.

Roger Scruton, in *Art and Imagination*, clearly thinks he can hold on to both insights. He claims that knowledge of a piece of music may provide "reasons (and not just causes) for my hearing it in a certain way" (1974: 179). Later he is more explicit still: "There is such a thing as accepting a reason for an aesthetic experience; an aesthetic experience can feature as the conclusion of a ... syllogism" (1974: 244). (The omitted phrase is important; I will introduce it below.) Scruton attempts to accommodate these claims within a view on which aesthetic engagement involves something like aspect perception. As such, aesthetic experience is in part an exercise of

the imagination. As a form of thought, the imagination is subject to reason, but, as a form of thought able to enter into and transform experience, it is also one with consequences for perception. Thus it is, I think, that Scruton hopes to reconcile the two insights.

However, we will be in no position to gauge the success of this or any other response until we have a sharper conception of the problem it is intended to solve. What, precisely, is the difficulty with the idea of arguing for a perception?

## TWO ARGUMENTS FOR INCOMPATIBILITY

The answer may seem to lie in the proper scope of reasoning. One might think that only certain things can be supported by arguments, and that perceptions plainly lie outside the relevant class. Perhaps it is not quite clear what does form that class, since beliefs, judgments, and propositions all seem *prima facie* candidates; but, whatever its precise membership, none of the candidates seem perceptual. Perhaps, then, it is simply obvious that perceptions are the wrong sort of thing to be supported by reasoning. Unfortunately, this line is undermined by the fact that some think that items quite other than propositions and certain propositional attitudes can form the conclusions of arguments. In particular, Aristotle thought that practical reasoning could issue directly in *action*. If conclusions can be either propositions (or certain attitudes to them) or actions, it is not at all obvious that conclusions cannot also be perceptions. At the very least, it now appears reasonable to ask why not.

These considerations hold even if we draw a distinction between conclusions of arguments, which we might think can only be propositions, and their targets – that is, the states they are intended to induce in the believer. We might take the latter to be the state of believing the proposition which forms the conclusion, or that of judging it to be the case. The distinction between conclusions and targets in no way blunts the force of the line above, which in effect claims that a perception is not the right sort of state to be the target of an argument. However, with or without the distinction, the line's appeal is considerably reduced by the Aristotelian view. In these terms, Aristotle took *actions* to be the targets of *practical* reasoning.

Of course, there are certain ways of construing perceptions on which they clearly cannot be supported by reasoning. Plausibly, there can only be rational connections where there are concepts, because concepts are nothing more than the articulations within states that make it possible for there to be rational transitions between them (Crane 1992). Thus, if we take perceptions to lack the sort of inner structure required for conceptual content, or, more radically, to lack content at all, it will not make sense to

suggest that they might admit of rational support. But at least some thinkers consider it coherent to suppose that perceptions have conceptual content. Moreover, they do so with good reason. For only if perceptions have such content can they play a role that it is very plausible they do play: that of acting as *sources* of reasons. Our perceptions seem able to provide rational support, of a particularly strong kind, for our beliefs. If entering into rational relations requires the *relata* to be conceptually structured, there is every reason to think that perceptions are so structured (McDowell 1994; Brewer 1998). And then, of course, our problem is nicely sharpened. Not only have we rejected one explanation of why perceptions cannot be supported by reasons; we have also conceded not merely that perceptions *can* enter into rational relations, but that they do. Why, unlike many of the other items able to enter into such relations, can a perception only be the supporting *relatum*, and not the supported?

I offer two answers to this question. They are distinct, but not competing. It could be that the claims of both are true. If so, it would be overdetermined that perceptions cannot be supported by reason.

The first answer appeals to the special epistemic status of perceptions, and in particular to their self-sufficiency. Anything that counts as a perception requires no epistemic support. That is why, however the perception is arrived at, and whatever the wider epistemic context, the perception itself is always sufficient to justify the appropriate belief (i.e. the belief that reflects the conceptual content of the perception). Of course, the wider context can lead one to doubt one's experience. But that is precisely to doubt that one has perceived that *p*. If the experience counts as a perception that *p*, then it needs no bolstering or support. But the job of argument, or reasoning, is to provide epistemic support for whatever plays the role of conclusion. Given the self-sufficiency claim, a perception is, by its very nature, the sort of state with respect to which there is nothing for argument to do. Hence there cannot be rational support for a perception.

If the first answer asserts that the nature of perception leaves it without any need of the services of reason, the other answer makes the opposite claim. The nature of reason leaves no room for anything like perception. The key claim is this:

Principle of Rational Sufficiency: any argument must be in principle sufficient to rationally motivate adoption of its conclusion.

Of course, not all argument is deductive, and deductive or not, not all argument is in context sufficient to render rational one's adopting the conclusion. There can be considerations for and against, and something is not denied the title 'argument' simply by the fact that something can also



be said on the other side. But if there were no countervailing considerations (if the putative reasoning were the *only* consideration, either of an argumentative nature or otherwise, bearing on the matter), then how could anything recognizable as argument fail to bring rationally sensitive subjects to adopt the conclusion? (Perhaps we should distinguish between cases in which no countervailing considerations are known, and cases in which there are known to be no countervailing considerations. The Principle of Rational Sufficiency is more plausible for the latter.) An argument just is something the grasp of which rationally motivates adopting the claim supported, and a rational subject just is so constituted that when she grasps an argument she is appropriately motivated. Whatever the rational force thus exerted, if it is the only such force, it should be sufficient, in a rational subject, to bring about that result.

Now, it is hard to see how the Principle of Rational Sufficiency is consistent with the claim that the conclusion of an argument can be a perception. For perception essentially involves an element of what McDowell (1994) calls 'receptivity,' or 'openness to the world.' We can make no sense of the idea that one is in perceptual contact with the environment unless we suppose that, at least to some degree, one's state is dictated by, and hence reflects, the nature of that environment. But if perception requires receptivity, merely grasping an argument cannot be sufficient to be in a perceptual state. Something beyond one's own rationally interlinked states must play a role. Nothing with a perception as its outcome can meet the demand the Principle of Rational Sufficiency imposes.

(A simple form of the thought here is this. One can understand an argument in the absence of the thing it concerns; but one cannot have a perception of that thing in those conditions. Hence the conclusion of an argument cannot be a perception. This is a form of the appeal to receptivity because the reason why perception requires the presence of the thing perceived is that perception is openness to how the world is.)

I will make four observations about this second account of why perceptions cannot be supported by reason. First, it is genuinely independent of the first account. For it does not depend on any claim about the epistemological role of perception. Receptivity is integral to perception's having its epistemic role, but to say that perception involves receptivity does not itself amount to a claim about that role.

Second, although I find the Principle of Rational Sufficiency plausible, something weaker would suffice for the case against reasoning to a perception, namely:

Weakened Principle of Rational Sufficiency: anything capable of standing as the conclusion of an argument must be such that *some* argument could in principle be sufficient for its rational adoption.

The Weakened Principle allows for the existence of arguments which do not, even in ideal circumstances, suffice to rationally motivate adopting their conclusions. But the Weakened Principle *does* require that at least some possible argument be sufficient for that adoption. Since any perception involves receptivity, and no argument can provide that, the Weakened Principle still excludes perceptions from playing the role of conclusions.

Third, it is important to see the precise nature of the difficulty posed for receptivity by the Principle of Rational Sufficiency, in either form. The problem is not that there is more to perception than its conceptual content. That may be so. Perhaps some philosophers are right to claim that the phenomenology of perceptual experience is not fully determined by its conceptual content. If so, there is an aspect of perception that cannot be rationally motivated, and which thus renders perceptions unable to meet the demand the Principle imposes. Now, if that were the source of the real difficulty, we would expect it to hold for other states with equal claim to richer phenomenologies than their conceptual contents secure. Examples would be states of imagination, at least where that is not purely propositional, and experiential memories. Now, it may be that such states cannot be rationally supported any more than perceptions can. But, if so, the reason does not lie in the relation of phenomenology to content. In the case of imaginings, the real obstacle is that their conceptual contents are not of the right kind. They are not, as it were, assertoric: they do not purport to capture how things really are (as both perceptions and beliefs claim to). Experiential memories are not similarly handicapped. But here the fundamental problem is the same as for perception. Whether or not there is more to these states than their assertoric conceptual contents, those contents involve the receptivity, the openness to things, which rational support cannot provide. Roughly speaking, in memory one is open to the past, as in perception one is open to the present. Not all assertoric conceptual content involves a contribution from the world in this way. That is how beliefs can be supported by reasoning. But the contents of perception and memory do require the world to play its role, and that is the real source of the second difficulty.

This allows us, as a fourth comment, to distinguish this difficulty from yet another possible problem for the idea of rationalized perception: that perceiving is somehow passive, whereas if argument is to operate on us, it needs to be targeted on states that are within our control. One might be able to argue for the incompatibility of reason and perception in that way, but it is not the line taken here. True, the above makes central use of the idea of receptivity, and McDowell himself sometimes terms that 'passivity.' We might think that that with respect to which we are passive lies beyond our control. However, even if this connection can be made,

McDowell (following Kant in this as in everything else here) also takes perception essentially to involve an element of activity or 'spontaneity.' For McDowell, perception is both active and passive, and only thus able to play its epistemic role. This confronts the putative problem with a dilemma. If the states arguments aim to induce must be *partly* under our control, then, for all we have said, perception meets this condition. And if the requirement is for *complete* control, it is unclear that it is met by the paradigmatically rational states: beliefs or judgments. The argument from rational sufficiency need not negotiate a path between these obstacles. It need not take a stand on whether the states argument aims to induce involve elements outside the subject's control. The real difficulty requires no more than the thought that perception is partly passive, and appeals, not to control, but to the idea that argument should, in the right circumstances, be enough to bring about the state rationalized.

## RESPONSES TO THE ARGUMENTS

I have presented two arguments for thinking that the insights of the first section cannot be reconciled. What can be said in response? Is there a way to weaken one or other of the insights so as to achieve reconciliation? Or must we look for some more radical resolution of our difficulty?

Let us begin by attempting to weaken the insight that the outcome of critical reasoning is a perception. The arguments above turn on two features of perception: that it is epistemically self-standing and that it involves receptivity. Can progress be made by rejecting these as features of the state forming the outcome of critical discussion?

The obvious move is simply to deny that such a state is genuinely self-standing or receptive to the world. Perhaps it merely seems to be so, as in the case of perceptual illusion. The claim need not be that the worldly contents of critical perceptions are illusory – merely that, like illusions, the states themselves seem to have features in common with paradigmatic cases of perception, but which, in fact, they lack. However, this does not get us very far. It solves the problems of the previous section in their original form, but succumbs to revisions of them. For, even if I merely *take* my state to be epistemically self-standing, I can hardly also take it to allow for the sort of support reasons supply. And if I take it to be a form of receptivity to how things are, I can hardly allow that it meets the constraint imposed by the Principle of Rational Sufficiency (in either form) on states able to form the conclusions (or targets, if one prefers) of arguments. Thus, whether or not a third party can make sense of these states being supported by argument,

I cannot. And an argument that in principle cannot move the subject of the states it is intended to induce, is not, in any recognizable sense, an argument at all.

Therefore, if this approach is to achieve anything significant, it seems it must take the more radical form of denying that critical perceptions even purport to have these two features. Scruton's view fits this rough characterization. Not that he conceives of his account in these terms. Since he does not explicitly discuss what is problematic about the idea of a rationalized perception, he does not construct his account so as to meet the current desiderata. Nonetheless, his main idea – that a critical perception is a form of, or analogous to, the perception of an aspect – can be naturally developed so as to fit this bill. For when I perceive an aspect, for instance in seeing Wittgenstein's triangle as having just fallen on its side (1953: II.xi), I do not take my state to be self-supporting, or to involve receptivity to the world, as I do with an ordinary perception. Insofar as my perception is of an aspect (as opposed, say, to being the perception of a triangle), it lacks these features.

However, there is a third feature that the discussion above has revealed to be essential if perceptions are to be supported by reasons: perceptions must have *assertoric* conceptual content. It is far from obvious that it is possible to jettison the two features above (receptivity and epistemic self-sufficiency) without also ejecting this third. The difficulty is not that no state could combine lacking the first two features with possessing the third. Belief does just that, and hence is unproblematically and paradigmatically open to support by reasoning. But what else can offer this combination? How can any state other than belief avoid laying claim to being epistemically self-standing, or to being a form of openness to the world, while nonetheless laying claim to representing how things really are? In the present context, the question is pressing. Where aspect perceptions lack receptivity and epistemic self-sufficiency, they also lack assertoric content. When I see the triangle as having fallen over, my experience does not present itself as capturing how the world is. Moreover, this lack of assertoric content is intimately bound to the state's lacking the other two features. Now, the category of aspect perception is broad. Perhaps other cases will reintroduce assertoric content. Consider, for instance, my perception of the Necker cube. Arguably this does have assertoric content. Even if I am aware of the possibility of reversing the cube's orientation, it might be argued that my experience presents the world as containing a cube at the orientation I currently see it as having. It's just that, since I know I can reverse the cube at will, I know not to take the experience with this assertoric content at face value. The problem is to convince oneself that this is the right thing to say about assertoric content

without thereby reintroducing receptivity and epistemic self-sufficiency – or rather, without reintroducing the state's purporting to have these features. In the absence of a clear case, it is far from obvious that appeal to aspects helps solve our current difficulty.

Thus it is difficult to construe critical perception as combining just the features required to avoid the two arguments against its being supported by reason, without disqualifying it on other grounds. Perhaps this claim would not unsettle Scruton. For although a state must possess assertoric content if it is to be supported by *theoretical* reason, there is no such requirement if the reason in question is practical. I can have good pragmatic reasons for imagining something (perhaps I think I will thereby immunise myself against irrational fears), for all that such states do not lay claim to revealing how the world is. And it is precisely practical rationality that Scruton takes to be available to critical perception. For above I quoted him rather selectively. His claim in full is that an aesthetic experience can be the conclusion of a *practical* syllogism (Scruton 1974: 244). In preferring 'experience' to 'perception' and in acknowledging that the rational support for such a state can only be practical, Scruton perhaps shows that he is alert to the difficulties in any stronger position.

In any case, Scruton's own account offers too little to satisfy. In effect he has abandoned both insights. In abandoning the idea that the outcome of critical argument is something which at least purports to capture how things are, he betrays the insight about critical perception. When I am brought to see a work of art a certain way, I do not take my experience merely to reveal how the work can be seen, but to reveal, at least potentially, something about the work's nature. Compare in this respect two experiences of an operatic aria. One is the outcome of fruitful critical discussion; the other the effect of being prompted by some comic to hear joke English sentences in its lines. Both experiences reveal how the piece can be heard; but the former seems further to reveal something substantial about the nature of the work. In allowing his 'experiences' to lack assertoric content, and accepting that they need not even purport to exhibit receptivity and self-sufficiency, Scruton betrays the phenomenology which the second insight sought to capture.

Scruton fares no better with the other insight, that concerning critical reasoning. Of course practical reasoning is genuine reasoning. But is this the reasoning critical discussion standardly involves? Practical reasoning usually proceeds by spelling out how acting in a certain way will enable one to attain some goal or satisfy some desire. In the aesthetic case, the background desire or goal is presumably that of appreciating the object. But does 'appreciating' here mean something like *taking pleasure in*, or does it mean *grasping the nature of*? Scruton's account can certainly appeal to the

former, but that does not seem true to our critical practice. The comic might show me how to get pleasure from the aria just as surely as the critic does. Nonetheless, if he does so by offering me pragmatic justifications ('approach it in such and such a way, and you will find it funny'), he is hardly offering the same kind of consideration, in pursuit of the same kind of end, as the critic. The critic seems concerned, not to maximize my positive states, but to make me aware of the work's true nature. That is one reason why the activity is appropriately dubbed 'criticism:' it seeks a balanced appraisal of both strengths and weaknesses, not merely to maximize whatever positive states of the viewer might be wrung from an encounter with the work. Hence the reasons the critic provides are not pragmatic but of another kind, the kind that, for want of any less tendentious term, we dub 'theoretical.' The insight that there *is* critical reasoning is the recognition that critical discussion really does offer such reasons. In reconfiguring those reasons as pragmatic, Scruton has in effect set that insight aside.

Now, I do not deny that there is a sense in which Scruton's experiences count as perceptions, and count as revealing something about the work's nature. For such talk can be rendered appropriate provided merely that we can make sense of a standard of correctness, something making it the case that one of those experiences is right, or appropriate to the work. ('Standard of correctness' is Richard Wollheim's phrase – Wollheim 1987: ch. 2. I here use the idea in a context rather broader than that in which he introduced it.) There are many possible sources of such a standard – examples include the intentions of the artist, or the pattern of responses on the part of the subject's community, or perhaps of some privileged group within it. Provided some such standard can be found, we can make sense of there being a fact of the matter for an individual's response to reflect, or fail to reflect. And with that notion can go that of perceiving the quality to which the response is a guide. However, whatever the merits of this model of objectivity, it will not allow Scruton to resuscitate his claim to capture the two insights. The insight about critical perception is not that there is some sense of 'perception' in which the outcome of critical argument is such a state. Rather, I have just argued, the insight is that critical discussion issues in something with the features discussed above, features which the appeal to a standard of correctness does nothing, by itself, to reinstate. And the insight about critical reasoning, we now see, is that it is explicitly reasoning aimed at the object's nature, and hence theoretical in form. The most the idea of a standard could suggest, within the context of Scruton's account, is that critical discussion offers us *practical* reasons for responding in certain ways, which responses can then be taken, given appropriate facts about intentions or patterns of response, to reveal the nature of the object. But this leaves the reasoning for the response

still thoroughly practical, unsuitably disconnected from the thought that the responses reveal something about the object.

We are trying to reconcile two insights about criticism, by overcoming the problems presented above for the idea of arguing for a perception. The obvious strategies are to weaken one insight or the other. We began this section by trying to avoid the problems by watering down the insight about critical perception. That took us to Scruton's view, which, we now see, also ends up weakening the insight about critical reasoning. The upshot of our discussion is that Scruton reconciles the insights only by weakening both to such an extent that he betrays them. The failure of his account does not prove that either strategy is doomed to failure, but it does provide grounds for pessimism. Rather than exploring these strategies farther, I will briefly discuss just one other position in the literature – that offered, in a different but related context, by John McDowell.

In "Virtue and Reason," McDowell contrasts the case in which we engage in deductive reasoning with a second sort of case, in which "we explicitly appeal to appreciation of the particular instance in inviting acceptance of our judgements" (1998: 63–4). He then makes the following claim:

A skilfully presented characterization of an instance will sometimes bring someone to see it as one wants; or one can adduce general considerations, for instance about the point of the concept a particular application of which is in dispute. Given that the case is one of the second kind, any such arguments will fall short of rationally necessitating their conclusion in the way a proof does. But it is only the prejudice I am attacking that makes this seem to cast doubt on their status as arguments; that is, as appeals to reason. (1998: 65)

McDowell is discussing morality, not aesthetics, but his observation bears directly on our present concerns. In effect, he is suggesting that ethical thinking, like aesthetic judgment, involves seeing matters a certain way. The outcome of ethical argument is thus, at least in some extended sense, a perception (1998: 56). And, to the worry that bringing someone to see something cannot readily be construed as the outcome of a rational process, McDowell has a radical response. Reasoning is the following of (certain) rules. But the moral of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule following is that it too, in the end, depends on such apparently brute and non-rational facts as seeing things a certain way. Thus it is only a 'prejudice' that allows something like explicit argument to count as reasoning, but denies that title to the many and various processes of bringing others to see things a certain way. In effect then, since following an argument is itself, at root, simply

to see things a certain way, there is no more difficulty with the idea of an argument for a perception than there is with the very idea of reasoning.

This radical move certainly promises to solve – perhaps ‘banish’ would be a better word – our difficulty. However, I would like to manage with something less extreme. There is a difference between, on the one hand, winning others round by appealing to what they already accept in order to bring them to what they as yet do not; and, on the other, simply getting them to see something. Indeed, critical discussion often involves both, but we need the distinction precisely to understand its nature at any particular point. McDowell’s radical move threatens to efface this difference. Let us, then, see how far we can get without playing this card.

## **TOWARDS A POSITIVE ACCOUNT**

Is there, then, no way to reconcile the two insights, that criticism involves reasoning, and that its outcome is a perception? Perhaps there is not. Perhaps the considerations above, if sound, in effect serve to articulate the depth of the problem facing the idea of critical argument directed at a perception. However, I will close on a more optimistic note, by exploring one way we might attempt to reconcile the insights. My suggestions will be very tentative, but I hope they are at least promising.

The difficulties to be overcome are those presented in the two arguments of the second section. Perception seems to leave no place for reasoning, since it is self-supporting. And reasoning seems to leave no place for the receptivity essential to perception, since reasons must in principle be sufficient to bring about adoption of the conclusion. How might we steer around these obstacles?

In the case of both obstacles, the maneuvers needed to avoid them point us in the same direction. Receptivity can be reconciled with the sufficiency of reason if, in the cases in question, there is no grasp of reason in the absence of the openness to the world which perception requires. And the self-sufficiency of perception can be reconciled with its being supported by reasoning only if the reasoning is an element in that perception. Thus, we need to reconfigure the notion of perception that is in play. It is not an atomistic, momentary experience, with relatively little internal structure. Rather, it is a complex, one that can perhaps only be built up over time, and which itself contains the reasoning that supports it. In other words, we must reject the idea that we are trying to find something, an argument, which takes us to a perception from states – beliefs – both distinct from it and quite other in nature. The premises the subject is to grasp are themselves



perceptions, and moreover they are perceptions incorporated in the more complex perceptual state which forms the conclusion.

What sense can be made of this idea? Let us try to proceed by considering an analogous case, one not involving aesthetic judgment. Suppose we are on a deer hunt. I have seen a deer, standing quite still in the undergrowth. Although you are looking in exactly the right direction, you cannot make out the creature. Perhaps you express some doubt: am I sure that what I take to be a deer isn't just a play of shadows? What can I do to persuade you of my view? Of course, my best strategy is to bring you to see the deer for yourself. But how can I do this, and do any of the means available involve providing rational support for my claim?

In pursuit of my goal, I am liable to say things like the following: 'See that purple flower to the right, and the two patches of brown above and below it? The patches are parts of the flank. Higher, on the left, can you make out that patch of brown with white and brown wispy flecks? That is its ear.' And so on. I will point out various parts of the scene before you, separating those elements which form parts of the deer from those which do not; I will try to help you make sense of the former as parts of a larger whole, the deer. I will point out features in the undergrowth, either drawing your attention to parts you already perceive, or getting you to see them for the first time. And I try to help you to organize the patches of color thus attended to, by locating them as particular parts of the deer I want you to see. By getting you to see these things, and to see them as organized in these ways, I bring you, if I'm successful, to see the deer. But the subsidiary perceptions do not merely serve as causes of your seeing the deer. Rather, they form elements in the deer-perception itself. Seeing the deer involves, and does not merely require as a causal condition, seeing the two patches near the flower as part of the flank, or seeing the variegated patch higher on the left as an ear.

It is for this reason that the deer case admits of something like argument. You might counter one of my supporting claims: 'An ear? Are you sure? It looks more like a dead leaf to me.' In so doing you do not merely manifest a refusal to succumb to causal influence. Rather, you challenge my view of things. If that isn't an ear, perhaps the whole complex of undergrowth and anything that might be lurking in it needs to be seen differently. If I accept or seriously consider your response, then I myself am under threat of having to reconfigure what lies before me, since I am now deprived of an essential element in the organization I had perceptually imposed.

It is clear that something similar can occur in the context of critical discussion. Trying to persuade you that a Botticelli is prissy, I point to the extreme delicacy of the represented figures. I am trying not merely to get

you to see the delicacy en route to appreciating the prissiness: seeing the former is part of the total experience of the painting I want to bring about in you. Just as in the deer case, you might counter by denying that the figures are delicate. They are elegant for sure, and in a way fragile, but there is also a robust health to them, manifest in their firm, wiry postures and the flush in their cheeks. This disagreement, just as in the deer case, challenges me to rethink. If we see the figures in this light instead, how does the whole look? Perhaps it now appears differently, and the charge of prissiness is ill-founded.

Now, there are certainly differences between the two sorts of case. In the deer example, the supporting perceptions were of spatial parts of the deer. They formed elements in the complex perception towards which we were being persuaded, *qua* perceptions of parts of a larger whole. For instance, the two patches of brown had to be seen as parts of a single surface, if the surface thus glimpsed was to be seen as the flank of a deer caught in profile. In contrast, in the Botticelli case to see the delicacy of the figures is not in any interesting sense to see a spatial part of the painting. Seeing the prissiness of the whole cannot therefore involve seeing those parts as integrated into a whole the distinctive organization of which is itself spatial. However, this difference between the two cases seems to me unimportant. The notion of one perception forming a component in another does not only make sense when the objects the two perceptions present stand in the relation of spatial part to whole. Non-aesthetic examples might take other forms, as when seeing a found object of great antiquity as a digging tool requires me to see it as *amenable to being used* in certain ways. In any event, the notion of one perception involving another is no less clear in the Botticelli case than it is in the case of the deer.

How far does this view of things accommodate reasoning in critical discussion? How far does it allow us to carry out the maneuvers described above, in order to avoid the two obstacles to the very idea of reasoning to a perception?

The problem of epistemic self-sufficiency is that a perception cannot be supported by an argument (or anything else) because a perception is self-supporting. The solution I sketched was to suppose that the perception incorporates the argument. The current proposal makes sense of this as follows. The complex perception that is the outcome of critical discussion itself incorporates the more specific perceptions appealed to as 'premises.' More than this, the overall perception will include the relation between those premise-perceptions and the conclusion. That is, seeing the daintiness moves one to see the prissiness, and not just as a factor external to the perception. The prissiness one sees is presented, in perception, as a consequence, in part, of the daintiness.

The problem of the sufficiency of reason is that an argument cannot support a perception, because the former, *qua* sufficient, leaves no room for the receptivity essential to the latter. The suggested solution was that grasping the argument involves perceiving the object it concerns, and thus grasping the argument itself incorporates receptivity to how things are. Now, it is a fair question quite what this suggestion amounts to. Is it that one must perceive the object to understand the premises? Or that one must do so to understand the conclusion? Or that one must do so to understand the rational connection between them, that is, how the one follows from the other? My suspicion is that the solution must appeal to all three ideas here. For all three elements are involved in feeling the suasive force of reasoning, and the suggestion should be that *that*, one's *responsiveness* to the rational power of the argument, involves a receptiveness to how the object is.

Fortunately there are materials we can appeal to in order to establish the connection between perceiving and understanding at all three points. For it is one of the central ideas of the tradition which insists that critical discussion is directed to a perception that such discussion appeals to features not *qua* instances of a general type, but in the precise form in which they are instantiated in the context of the work. Thus the daintiness to which I appeal in an effort to persuade you that the Botticelli is prissy, and indeed the prissiness which I am trying to bring you to see, is in each case this particular property, as it presents itself in the context of the painting. In other words, I direct your attention to features of the work by using words which, of necessity, fail to capture the precise features I want you to attend to. Words fail to complete this task, and only perception can complete it. And if this is true of the features the relation between which I hope to exploit, how much more true will it be of that relation itself.

Thus there are at least the bones here of an account able to circumvent the two major obstacles to the idea that critical discussion might be an argument for perceiving the work a certain way. Let me close by assessing how far what the proposal has secured merits the name 'argument.' Have I really shown how there can be *rational* support for a perception?

First, I make the positive case. Consider again the possibility of rejecting the supporting statement. The figures are elegant, but not excessively delicate. The threat of having to rethink how one sees the whole is thus imposed. Or consider a different situation. One accepts that the figures are extremely delicate, but disagrees that seeing them as so requires one to see the whole as prissy. The figures are delicate in a particular way, and their delicacy is not prissy. Or, while in another context such delicacy as this might be prissy, in this context it is not. (Perhaps it is redeemed by the firm working of the brushstrokes through which these effete characters

are conveyed.) The structure of these various machinations reflects that of the paradigm cases of argument. One can resist a conclusion by rejecting a premise. Or one can accept the premises but deny that the conclusion follows from them.

Now, this structural isomorphism by itself proves nothing. Mere causal connections could exhibit that. I could respond to your attempt to push me off the see-saw by pushing back myself, thus forcing a different 'conclusion.' I could simply resist your push, rejecting your 'premise.' Or I could allow you to push on, given that you are not in fact grasping my clothing at all, but that of the person behind me. But in the case of critical discussion, unlike the manifestly causal one, resistance, acquiescence, and the like essentially operate through one's engaging with the truth or falsity of the claims offered in support. I reject your claim about the figures' delicacy; I do not simply ignore it. Or, if I accept your claim, I can dispute its connection to the feature it is intended to support. That truth and falsity occupy this central place provides grounds for thinking that the connections here described merit the name of justification or support.

What are the grounds for skepticism? These are best directed at the idea that the proposal really accommodates a connection, between the putative premises and the putative conclusion, which is *rational*. This (and hence the claim that the various perceptions really are premises and conclusion) might be doubted on several grounds. I discuss just one.

We are asked to accept that the connection between the 'premise'-perceptions and the 'conclusion' is rational. But is the holding of this connection constituted simply by the conceptual contents of those perceptual states, or not? If it is, then it ought to be possible to find other states, such as beliefs, that have the same contents, and are similarly connected. But then why can someone not grasp those conceptual contents, and the relation between them, in the absence of the object they concern? If they can, we have abandoned the centerpiece of the solution to the problem posed by rational sufficiency, the idea that in these cases the reasons cannot be grasped without the openness to the world involved in perception. If, on the other hand, the connection between 'premise' and 'conclusion' is not constituted by their having the conceptual contents they do, then how is the connection rational? After all, we are supposing that conceptual contents just are the complements of the rational connections between states, and vice versa. The two notions stand or fall together.

To respond it seems I must deny that it follows from the fact that the particular content of a given perceptual state is conceptual that it can be the content of a state of another kind, here a belief. Rather, at least in the case of the conceptual contents of perceptual states, some of those contents

cannot be shared by belief states. At least, they cannot be so shared in the absence of the perceptual state – I see no reason to deny that a perceptual belief can reflect the content of *any* of my perceptual states, provided the perceptual state is, as it were, present to give the belief its content. So the contents of perceptual states outstrip our ability to express them, that is, to formulate them in a form that could provide the content for beliefs. At least, the contents outstrip our ability to express them except by using expressions (demonstratives such as ‘this daintiness’) which themselves advert to the object currently before me. Thus there are conceptual contents for perceptions which cannot be shared by non-demonstrative beliefs, beliefs one can form in the absence of the object they concern.

Perhaps this response can be made good. Certainly some of those who defend the conceptual content of perception, including McDowell, are already committed to something like these claims. However, there are two qualifications to any optimism here. First, McDowell is committed to the idea that for a given perception there may be no non-demonstrative expression (and hence non-demonstrative belief) currently available to us which captures its content. I seem committed to the stronger claim that there may be no such expression (and hence belief) in principle available to us. For even the possibility of such an expression or belief threatens to show that the reasoning involved in the critical case can be grasped independently of receptivity to the object. Second, McDowell is already forced to make claims of this broad nature only because his stance on the content of perception is particularly strong. He not only accepts that such content can be conceptual; he denies that it can be anything else. There is no non-conceptual content to perception. Nothing I have said earlier in this paper commits me to this denial; and it is a denial I would like to avoid. Thus the response I have sketched cannot find support from McDowell’s position without forcing on me views I would like to resist. It must, if possible, stand alone. Whether it can do so is another question. In this, as in many other respects, the reply given, and indeed the proposal sketched, are, at most, first moves towards a resolution of our difficulties.

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