

## THE ACQUAINTANCE PRINCIPLE

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The Acquaintance Principle maintains that aesthetic knowledge must be acquired through first-hand experience of the object of knowledge and cannot be transmitted from person to person. This implies that aesthetic knowledge of an object cannot be acquired either from an accurate description of the non-aesthetic features of the object or from reliable testimony of its aesthetic character. The question I address is whether there is any sound argument in support of the Principle. I give scant consideration to the possibility of deriving knowledge from a non-aesthetic description. If this were to be a real possibility, it would certainly disprove the Acquaintance Principle, but its impossibility would not establish it. Furthermore, if the way knowledge were to be derived from a non-aesthetic description were through its enabling a person to imagine the object (as one might imagine music from a score), a defender of the Acquaintance Principle might simply deem imagining to be a form of first-hand experience. I focus on the possibility of acquiring aesthetic knowledge through reliable testimony because here there is a style of argument that, if correct, would rule out the possibility of knowledge of an item's aesthetic properties being transmitted to someone who lacks the requisite first-hand experience, and the manoeuvre of including imagining under the head of first-hand experience is not available. An argument of this kind is, I believe, the only possible way of establishing the Acquaintance Principle. I try to show that this style of argument fails and that the Acquaintance Principle should be rejected.

RICHARD Wollheim has referred to what he takes to be

a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics, which may be called the Acquaintance Principle, and which insists that judgements of aesthetic value, unlike judgements of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another.<sup>1</sup>

Wollheim says nothing about what the 'very narrow limits' of transmission might

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980), p. 233. My concern is the claim that aesthetic judgements must be based on first-hand, not second- or third-hand, experience. I shall understand first-hand experience to include, where appropriate, perception, not of the object itself, but of an adequate reproduction, one that provides a good idea of the object's appearance. (Difficulties in elucidating the idea of an adequate alternative to perception or awareness of the object itself are well expressed in Paisley Livingston's 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 43 [2003], no. 3, which I was able to read only after this paper was finished.)

be, what it is about judgements of aesthetic value that allows transmission—transmission of aesthetic knowledge—within these limits, and what restricts transmission to these limits. Note that this is a principle about judgements of aesthetic *value* (which might be understood either as judgements of absolute or comparative overall aesthetic value or, perhaps, as judgements of inherent aesthetic merit- or defect-constituting properties). How well-entrenched this principle is in aesthetics is a moot point. There appears to be a paucity of arguments in support of it. Of course, Kant *defined* an aesthetic judgement as one whose basis can be nothing other than the subject's hedonic response to the item judged. But if we take Kant's prime example of an aesthetic judgement—a judgement of free beauty—although his definition precludes characterizing my belief, based on your reliable testimony, that the flower you are looking at is beautiful as being an aesthetic judgement, this does not imply that you have not transmitted to me the knowledge that it is beautiful. It is true that people are in general less reliable in their judgements of aesthetic value than in their judgements of colour, for example. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that nobody could ever be in a position in which they have adequate justification to credit another with exceptionally good aesthetic judgement and so to accept that person's verdict on an item they themselves have not perceived. In fact, there is no insurmountable barrier to knowledge of something's being beautiful being transmitted from one person to another, and the Acquaintance Principle, understood as a thesis about judgements of overall aesthetic value, has no plausibility.

Others take the principle to apply to judgements of aesthetic *properties*, understood in a wide Sibley-style sense. Michael Tanner, who accepts the Acquaintance Principle for judgements of aesthetic properties, has suggested that part of the explanation of why the Principle holds is that the ascription of aesthetic properties 'does not follow from the description of the phenomenal properties on which they supervene in such a way that from the phenomenal description the aesthetic properties can be inferred'.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that, if the principle does hold and

<sup>2</sup> Michael Tanner, 'Ethics and Aesthetics are –?', in José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (eds), *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 29. This is a familiar line of thought that derives from Frank Sibley. For example, Sibley suggests that the reason a person needs to experience a work of art in order to judge that it possesses a merit-constituting property is that there is no conceptual connection between its possessing a determinate merit-responsible property and its possessing the merit-constituting property for which the determinate merit-responsible property is responsible. See Frank Sibley, 'Particularity, Art and Evaluation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume XLVIII (1974). An item's aesthetic properties could not in general be derived from a description of its phenomenal properties, for its aesthetic properties are a function of various features other than its phenomenal properties, such as its artistic category. I leave aside the question of the truth or falsity of the view that the possession of an aesthetic property cannot legitimately be inferred from a description of all of the item's relevant non-aesthetic properties because of the manifest insufficiency of the view to establish the Acquaintance Principle. (There is an extended discussion of this view in Paisley Livingston's paper, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics'.)

if this fact does constitute part of the explanation of its holding, this fact could not be the complete explanation. For in itself it implies nothing about the impossibility of aesthetic judgements being transmitted from one person to another. Tanner proceeds to make another claim:

judgements of aesthetic, and in some cases moral, value must be based on first-hand experience of their objects not simply because one is in no position to assert the presence of the requisite properties without the experience, but also because one is not capable of understanding the meaning of the terms which designate the properties without the experience.<sup>3</sup>

But the assertion that one cannot understand the meaning of evaluative terms that designate the properties ascribed to objects without first-hand experience of those objects, which Tanner puts forward as having universal validity in aesthetics, is based on loose reasoning. For it does not follow from the fact that he emphasizes—that it is possible to encounter works of art which provide one with one's concept of greatness and which serve as touchstones for judging works of art—that every term that designates a value-laden aesthetic property is such that its meaning can be understood only through acquaintance with whatever particular work it happens to be applied to.

For Roger Scruton, the Acquaintance Principle holds for (so-called) aesthetic *descriptions* precisely because one must embrace a non-realist conception of them: the acceptance condition of an aesthetic description is not a belief (that the item described has the property ascribed to it); rather, one can assert or assent sincerely to such a characterization only if one has had a certain (typically affective) experience of the item so characterized.<sup>4</sup> But—leaving the issue of realism aside—is it really necessary to be acquainted with something in order to be able to assert (justifiably) or assent sincerely to an aesthetic description of that thing?

Philip Pettit, in the process of countering Scruton's anti-realism, has advanced a claim about aesthetic characterizations—characterizations of a work of art as 'graceful or awkward, tightly or loosely organised, dreamy or erotic, inviting or distancing', for example—that is tantamount to the Acquaintance Principle taken in the strongest sense, as not admitting transmission even within 'very narrow limits'. He takes aesthetic characterizations to be 'essentially perceptual', by which he means that 'the putatively cognitive state one is in when, perceiving a work of art, one sincerely assents to a given aesthetic characterisation, is not a state to which one can have non-perceptual access'. Accordingly, even though someone, who has good reason to trust the testimony of one who has perceived a particular work, might properly say, relying solely on that testimony, that they know that a certain aesthetic characterization is true of that work, their cognitive state is not the same as that of the one whose testimony is the source of their

<sup>3</sup> Tanner, 'Ethics and Aesthetics are –?', p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974), especially ch. 4.

knowledge. So 'Aesthetic characterisations are essentially perceptual in the sense that perception is the only title to the sort of knowledge—let us say, to the full knowledge—of the truths which they express.'<sup>5</sup>

Pettit's explanation of the essentially perceptual nature of aesthetic characterizations is that, if 'p' is a sentence offering such a characterization of W, then what is expressed by 'p' as this is asserted by one who perceives W cannot be fully understood by one who does (and has) not.<sup>6</sup> Suppose that 'p' characterizes W as being  $\phi$ . Then Pettit's idea is that what is expressed by 'p' is given by this associated conditional: 'W is  $\phi$  iff W is such that it looks (sounds, etc.)  $\phi$  under standard presentation and under suitable positioning that is allowed by the appropriate constraints.'<sup>7</sup> By standard presentation is meant presentation in appropriate conditions of observation (which vary across different art forms and even within the same art) to a competent person (competence again varying from work to work). By suitable positioning that is allowed by the appropriate constraints is meant, in short, correct positioning, positioning in the right reference class, that is, perceiving W against the background of, or by reference to, the class of relevant contrasts (which, simplifying, is a certain class of discernible variations on W).<sup>7</sup> An understanding of what standard *presentation* involves is problematic for someone who stands only in a testimonial relation to W. Pettit's claim is that only someone who perceives W can identify the right *positioning*—can understand what that positioning is—and so only such a person can fully grasp what is expressed by 'p'.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, aesthetic characterizations are essentially perceptual.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Pettit, 'The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism', in Eva Schaper (ed.), *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983), pp. 24–25.

<sup>6</sup> This is, I believe, the only possible explanation of the Acquaintance Principle, understood in its strongest sense. For if what is expressed by a sentence offering an aesthetic characterization of a work of art, as it is asserted by a perceiver of the work, can be fully understood by someone unacquainted with the work, then that person could have the perceiver's judgement transmitted to him: he could believe it, know that the perceiver is an exceptionally good judge of the aesthetic features of works of the kind in question, perhaps a better judge than he himself is, and so be fully justified in relying on the perceiver's opinion, and, accordingly, properly claim to know that the work is as so characterized. To resist this conclusion by having recourse to an extreme scepticism about the possibility of aesthetic knowledge would be a desperate and unwarranted strategy, which would in any case achieve only a pyrrhic victory: transmission of aesthetic knowledge would be ruled out simply through aesthetic knowledge being deemed impossible.

<sup>7</sup> For my present purpose it is not necessary to engage with Pettit's notion of positioning. His basic idea is that perception of a work of art, if it is to be such as to reveal the work's true aesthetic properties, must be informed by relevant background knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> The associated conditional could be understood in two ways: either 'standard presentation' and 'suitable positioning that is not incorrect' are short for what constitutes them or they are not. If not, it would be possible for one unaware of the right reference class to have a full understanding of the associated conditional and so of 'p'. For on this reading the associated conditional does not require one who understands it to know what the right reference class is. But Pettit intends it to be understood in such a manner that, just as understanding standard presentation requires knowing what it involves, so understanding appropriate positioning requires identification of the right reference class.

However, if a correct specification of the right positioning suffices for the identification of it, Pettit's claim would seem to be unwarranted, since one who has not perceived *W* might be informed of the right positioning by one who has. For Pettit's claim to go through, identification must preclude specification (or specification understandable by one who has not perceived *W*). But if identification of the right reference class precludes specification, it becomes unclear what identification consists in. Pettit maintains that the right reference class is available only through imagination and that only someone who is perceiving *W* and putting it imaginatively through various positionings can understand what that positioning is under which *W* looks (sounds, etc.)  $\phi$ —understanding being achieved only insofar as the person succeeds in making *W* look (sound etc.)  $\phi$ .<sup>9</sup> Now this is certainly too strong: no putting a work through various positionings is necessary to perceive the applicability of an aesthetic characterization to a work previously unfamiliar to one—it might well be obvious immediately—and you do not need to be perceiving a work you are familiar with in order to have a full understanding of an aesthetic characterization of it that you experienced it under when you did perceive it. But this can be left aside. There is a more important point: to adopt, or be able to adopt, the right positioning does not imply the ability to spell out what the appropriate reference class is. Now if adoption of the right positioning never guaranteed this ability, precisely because it is never possible to spell out the appropriate reference class, it might be thought that this would be sufficient to establish Pettit's claim. But it would not, for an understanding of the appropriate reference class might be acquired, not by a direct indication of the class, but by a reference to it as being the same as the one that is the appropriate reference class for another work that one is familiar with. What Pettit's argument needs is that knowledge of the right reference class is restricted to those who have interacted with *W* in the right manner. But given that the knowledge need not be specifiable by one who has it—and cannot be if Pettit's claim is to hold—it would seem that what possession of the knowledge comes to is simply the ability to perceive *W* as looking (sounding, etc.)  $\phi$ , which ability might well be possessed by someone unfamiliar with *W*. Furthermore, Pettit's reliance on the associated conditional, understood in the manner he intends, is questionable. Even if I have no idea under what (correct) positioning an unfamiliar work presents a certain aesthetic appearance, I understand perfectly the claim that the work is graceful or awkward, tightly or loosely organized, dreamy or erotic, inviting or distancing, for example. And I might have forgotten what the positioning was that enabled me to perceive a certain work under a particular aesthetic characterization, and yet fully understand my characterization of it.

The stratagem of distinguishing two different understandings of the notion of an aesthetic judgement—as a judgement that is a direct expression of the

<sup>9</sup> Pettit, 'The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism', p. 33.

character of one's own experience of an item, and as a judgement of an item's aesthetic character arrived at in any way (on the basis of another's testimony, for example)—would be an ineffective means of coming to terms with the Acquaintance Principle. The idea would be that in the first sense an aesthetic judgement of a work of art must be based on first-hand experience of the work, but in the second sense it need not: opposition to the Acquaintance Principle derives from not distinguishing the two senses. A closely related idea is that an unqualified ascription of an aesthetic property or value to a work will be regarded as misleading or improper if it is not based on first-hand experience: such an assertion is expected to be a reflection of the speaker's experience of the work, not of another's, no matter how reliable the other may be. The avowal of an aesthetic characterization is in this respect like an avowal of liking a taste: it would not be right to say of something you have not tasted that you like its taste, even if you are reliably assured that you will or would like it. But—leaving aside the question of their plausibility—what each of these positions fails to address is the issue in question: whether one can be justified in forming a firm judgement on another's testimony about the aesthetic character of a work of art—a judgement that has the same content as one based on first-hand experience. It is just this possibility that the Acquaintance Principle denies, and neither the distinguishing of different notions of aesthetic judgement nor the indication of a conversational implicature precludes a belief about an aesthetic property, based on testimony, from being justified and having the same content as one based on acquaintance.

In fact, there is a crucial difference between the cognitive states of someone unfamiliar with a certain work, who wholeheartedly accepts the view of a reliable informer as to an aesthetic characterization of the work, and the reliable informer as he perceives the work—and, usually, for some time, perhaps an indefinitely long time, afterwards; but this difference is not a difference in their understandings of the characterisation of the work. Suppose the work is characterized as being graceful. The reliable informer, as he perceives the work, will not just perceive the work as being graceful but will perceive the gracefulness *as it is realized in the work*. And when he quits the work he will retain some memory, perhaps a detailed memory, of the realization of the aesthetic property, a memory that, unless it is reinforced, is liable to become ever more sketchy as time passes. In contrast, the one who has no first-hand experience of the work will, given the infinitely many strikingly different ways in which gracefulness can be realized in a work of art, have little or no idea of the work's appearance simply in virtue of knowing at second hand that the work is graceful.<sup>10</sup> As the reliable informant's unreinforced memory of the work gets ever more dim, his cognitive state will

<sup>10</sup> Here there is a marked difference between aesthetic properties and many other properties that need to be perceived in order to be detected: the indefiniteness of the knowledge of something's appearance given by the possession of an aesthetic quality is vastly greater than that given by colour, shape and other perceptible properties.

diverge less and less from the virtually blank state of the one who has no first-hand experience of the work; and a time might well come when the reliable informer no longer has any idea of the work's appearance, and yet remembers that the work is graceful. If this happens, the crucial difference between the cognitive states of the two people has vanished. Now appreciation of a work is not a matter of knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of perceiving them as realized in the work. So you do not appreciate a work even if you know at second hand as full a characterization of its aesthetic properties as might be given by one who is perceiving the work. And attitudes and reactions linked to appreciation—liking or disliking, admiration, contempt, revulsion, and so on—are denied to you: you cannot like a work's gracefulness if you are unacquainted with the work. In terms of transmission, we might put the point by saying that an item's gracefulness, in contrast to its being graceful—likewise, an item's beauty, unlike its being beautiful—cannot be transmitted from person to person through testimony. If anything can be identified as the prime provider of false sustenance for the strong version of the Acquaintance Principle, as applied to aesthetic characterizations or judgements of aesthetic properties, it is, perhaps, this fact about the lack of transmissibility of appreciation and associated attitudes and reactions.<sup>11</sup> Although aesthetic judgements do not carry appreciation with them, judgements of aesthetic properties are as transmissible from one person to another as are other kinds of judgement.

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<sup>11</sup> Livingston makes a somewhat similar suggestion in §VI of his paper.