

Aesthetic Particularism and Artistic Uniqueness

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§1.

My talk, today, is concerned with the question of *particularism*, as it arises in aesthetics (though I will have a few things to say about ethical particularism as well). By ‘particularism’ I mean the view that the reason for something’s having a certain property, *P*, is entirely particular to it and need not count towards any other thing’s being *P*. (Jonathan Dancy, an ardent advocate of particularism in ethics, has described it as “...the thought that the behaviour of a reason...cannot be predicted from its behaviour elsewhere.”¹) Particularism is thus opposed to *generalism*, which is the view that if something is a reason for a thing’s being *P*, then it must at least *count* towards another thing’s being *P* too.

Aesthetic particularists have targeted both the aesthetic and evaluative dimensions of critical discourse, arguing that whether we ascribe aesthetic qualities to an artwork—such as when we say that Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* is “playful”—or claim that an artwork has a certain artistic value—as we do when we say that William Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* is a “masterpiece”—the reasons we offer on behalf of such judgments may hold for those particular judgments, but need not hold for any others. Whatever is responsible for *Fountain*’s playfulness or for *Tintern Abbey*’s masterpiece-status, the particularist maintains, need not count towards any other artwork’s playfulness or status as a masterpiece.

So much for this brief sketch of aesthetic particularism. What are some of its consequences? Well, if aesthetic particularism is true, then there can be no *critical principles*—

no true statements of the form, “Artworks which are F are P,” where ‘P’ denotes an aesthetic property or value—a point that is so obvious as not to require an argument, but merely an elucidation. To say that artworks which are F are playful or masterpieces is to suggest that F-ness always counts towards an object’s playfulness or towards its status as a masterpiece, so inasmuch as the particularist doctrine states that the reasons for something’s having a certain aesthetic property or value cannot be generalized, the possibility of critical principles is ruled out.

If there are no critical principles, then *deeming* an object as having a certain aesthetic property or value can no longer be thought of as a conclusion that one reaches by way of an inference, and this is why aesthetic particularists tend to embrace an *acquaintance-based epistemology*, according to which aesthetic properties and values are apprehended in actions and objects, through direct acquaintance with them. How, precisely, this acquaintance and the knowledge acquired thereby is understood varies, but since aesthetic particularists commonly treat acquaintance as being analogous to perception, their particularism is usually of an *intuitionist* character. (In ethics, one also finds particularists who interpret acquaintance as being akin to a kind of practical reasoning, and whose particularism, consequently, is more *Aristotelian* than intuitionist in character,² although the difference between these two notions of acquaintance can be overstated, since practical reasoning is central to intuitionism, and Aristotle, in his analysis of moral reasoning, appeals to what looks like an intuitionist account of moral perception.³)

An important consequence of this shift to an acquaintance-based epistemology in art criticism is that critical reasons can no longer serve as *justifications* for the aesthetic and evaluative judgments that we make. Where there are no grounds for inferring a conclusion, there can be no justification for it, at least in any commonly understood sense of

'justification'. Consequently, many aesthetic particularists have sought to provide an alternative account of the function of critical reasoning; of the role that reasons, particularistically construed, play with respect to critical judgments. The predominant view amongst aesthetic particularists (one which seems to be popular with some ethical particularists as well⁴) is that critical reasons "help us to see what the critic sees." They *facilitate our own acquaintance with aesthetic properties and values.*⁵

Those of you who are familiar with my work know that I am concerned about the implications of this line of thought—call it "the particularist arc"—for art criticism, but my focus today is not on effects but causes. Specifically, I want to talk about the relationship between aesthetic particularism and the idea of *artistic uniqueness*, for I am convinced that whether we are speaking of the aesthetic or ethical version of the doctrine, the case for particularism can only be made if the relevant uniqueness-claims are plausible. I do not find the claim that artworks are unique plausible, so I am not inclined to think aesthetic particularism plausible (my feelings on moral uniqueness and ethical particularism, interestingly enough, cut in precisely the opposite direction, but aside from a few stray remarks, *that* discussion will have to be left to another time and place). In truth, my view is *slightly* more complicated than this, but it will serve us better, if we allow the subtleties of the position to emerge over the course of our discussion, rather than trying to state them baldly at the outset.

§2.

We will appreciate the vital role played by uniqueness in the particularist doctrine, once we realize that particularism does not follow from the mere fact that reasons are contextually sensitive or, as Dancy calls them, "holistic."⁶ Suppose, for example, that it is only in the presence of certain other aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties that F-ness counts in favor

of an artwork's being playful or of its being a masterpiece; that in the presence of other properties, F-ness may have no aesthetic significance whatsoever or may even count *against* an artwork's playfulness or masterpiece-status. It does not follow from this that there can be no true generalizations connecting F-ness with playfulness or with an artwork's status as a masterpiece, but only that such generalizations must be *limited in their scope*, to the effect of: "Artworks which are F and which also have properties I-L are playful or masterpieces."⁷ No, the move beyond holism to particularism only makes sense, if we hold either that artworks and their aesthetically significant properties are *unrepeatable* or that they may not be repeated, as a matter of fact; that it is either impossible or unlikely that we will find ourselves confronted with artworks that are relevantly similar to those we have confronted in the past. Notice that the weaker formulation is sufficient for the particularist's purpose, because his generalist opponent is committed not only to artworks being repeatable in principle, but to their actually being repeated as a matter of fact; more, to their repetition being *routine*, for it is only against the backdrop of this sort of regularity that the generalist's *expectation* that reasons, in future cases, will point towards the same judgments that they have pointed to in the past is intelligible.

The role played by uniqueness in the particularist arc has been at the center of a highly visible discussion of critical reasons that has been ongoing, since the publication of two landmark articles in the middle of the last century: Frank Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts" and Arnold Isenberg's "Critical Communication." Indeed, at one point in "Aesthetic Concepts," Sibley *explicitly* connects aesthetic particularism and uniqueness, when he says that "the features which make something delicate or graceful and so on, are combined in a peculiar and unique way... [T]he aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colors and shapes."⁸ Just a few years earlier, Isenberg had

endeavored to make much the same point, with respect to uniqueness and artistic value when, in the course of a discussion of Ludwig Goldscheider's critical remarks on a painting by El Greco (*The Burial of Count Orgaz*), he observed that Goldscheider mentions the "rising and falling wavelike contour," along which the figures in the foreground are arranged, in support of a positive evaluation of the painting.⁹ Isenberg argues that the fact that the characters in the foreground of *The Burial of Count Orgaz* have the property of "being arranged on a rising and falling wavelike contour" cannot be a reason, in the traditional sense, for the painting's being artistically valuable, because this property need not be a positive feature in artworks. "[T]he same quality...would be found in a hundred lines one could draw on the board in three minutes..." Isenberg points out. "It could not be the critic's purpose to inform us of the presence of a quality as banal and obvious as this."¹⁰ It is only *this* arrangement of characters on a rising and falling wavelike contour that makes *this* painting artistically valuable, and the implication is that this is because the painting and its aesthetically significant properties are unique.

Jerrold Levinson has said that "...discussion in aesthetics has not really dealt with the question of whether [aesthetic uniqueness] is true, though its truth often seems to be unthinkingly assumed,"¹¹ and on surveying the literature on the subject, it is hard to disagree with him, for the case commonly made for artistic uniqueness is implicit rather than explicit. It is one that involves a kind of *backwards-inference*, by which I mean that the aesthetic particularist begins with the alleged *effects* of uniqueness—particularism, the absence of critical principles, and the acquaintance principle—and then infers that the *cause* must be the uniqueness of artworks and of their aesthetic and relevant non-aesthetic properties. This is precisely what both Sibley and Isenberg do, inasmuch as their respective appeals to uniqueness come in the wake of vigorous arguments on behalf of the particularity of reasons

and the necessity of acquaintance. (Of course, I am not suggesting that aesthetic particularists are the *only* ones who argue for uniqueness in this fashion. H.A. Prichard, for example, makes precisely such a backwards argument in ethics—from acquaintance back to uniqueness—when he observes that “if we doubt whether there really is an obligation to originate *A* in a situation *B*, the remedy lies not in any process of general thinking, but in getting face to face with a particular instance of the situation *B*, and then directly appreciating the obligation to originate *A* in the situation.”¹²)

§3.

The question, then, is whether artworks and their contexts are unrepeatable, in principle or as a matter of fact. *Are artworks unique in such a way that aesthetic particularism follows?* I pose the question this way, because *every* individual thing is unique in some sense, even if only in its relations to time and space, so the relevant question, really, is not the metaphysical standing of individual artworks—whether or not they are unique—but whether it is *useful* to generalize over them. What we want to know is whether artworks *defy type-identification*; whether they resist the kinds of generalizations that would support critical principles, connecting descriptive properties with aesthetic ones and descriptive and aesthetic properties with evaluative ones. I would argue that they *do not*; that to the contrary, generalization is essential to the proper practice of art history and art criticism.

In thinking about this, it will be helpful to compare, for a moment, art historical and critical judgments with moral ones, for it is my view that the demands of the first are diametrically opposed to those of the second. To type-identify individuals—to generalize over them—is to affect a certain *distance* between oneself and one’s object, and I would maintain that distance is simultaneously essential to the sound practice of art history and criticism and deadly to good moral practice; that the art historian and critic must stand at a

distance from the artworks they are talking about, if their work is to be sound, but that we must *not* stand at a distance from our fellow human beings, if we wish to treat them in ways that are decent and humane. The historical and critical stances, on this view, are by their nature, disinterested, but the moral stance is inherently *interested* in nature. I recognize that this claim is highly contentious—Mary Mothersill once remarked that to make a positive judgment about an artwork, if one did not like it, would be “bizarre,”¹³ and there is, of course, an entire tradition in ethics (for which we can thank Kant), which affords no place in the moral sphere to feelings of sympathy—but I cannot make a case for it here, without going far afield, so it will have to stand as a provocative hypothesis.¹⁴

There is no better place to begin making the case for the usefulness of generalizing over artworks than art history, because its reliance on generalizations, in the form of type-identifications, is obvious. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that the art historian’s *job*, when stripped down to its essentials, is to identify useful ways of generalizing over artworks. (What exactly is meant by ‘useful’ will become apparent shortly.) To take just one example, Heinrich Wölfflin, in his *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, explains that one of the essential ingredients in understanding the shift from fifteenth to sixteenth century European painting is the distinction between the *linear* and *painterly* styles; between “...line as the path of vision and guide of the eye, and the gradual depreciation of line...: the perception of the object by its tangible character...on the one hand, and on the other, a perception which is by way of surrendering itself to the mere visual appearance and can abandon ‘tangible’ design.”¹⁵ This distinction, which is predicated on gathering together a great number of individual artworks under one of only two stylistic types, makes it possible for the art historian to cut across individual and national characteristics and thereby enables him to fruitfully compare works which would otherwise defy comparison. “There are hardly

two artists who, although contemporaries, are more widely divergent by temperament than the baroque master Bernini and the Dutch painter Terboch,” Wolfflin observes. “[Y]et, if we were to lay drawings by the two masters side by side and compare the general features of technique, we should have to admit that...[i]n both, there is that manner of seeing in patches instead of lines, something that we can call painterly, which is the distinguishing feature of the seventeenth century in comparison with the sixteenth.”¹⁶ These comparisons, subsequently, make it possible for us to breach parochial boundaries; they help us to identify *epochal* trends in art. “[T]here can be discovered in the history of style a substratum of concepts referring to representation as such,” Wolfflin maintains, “and one could envisage a history of the development of occidental seeing, for which the variations in individual and national characteristics would cease to have any importance.”¹⁷

The advantage of being able to engage in this kind of generalization—to have available to us a broad spectrum of type-identifications, which alternatively include and exclude different sets of individual artworks—is not simply that in doing so, we increase our historical understanding of individual artworks and of artistic movements and epochs, although this is, of course, a key benefit. No, I would maintain that the art historian’s type-identifications also increase our understanding of artworks in the *critical* sense, in that they expand our capacity to *interpret* artworks and provide the essential grounds upon which to make *objective value judgments* about them.

I have argued elsewhere that our only hope of making sense of the normative dimension of critical evaluation is if we: (1) make room for a class of critical value judgments that are *not* interpreted as judgments of taste; and (2) construe those judgments *virtue*-theoretically—as assessments of success and failure, relative to certain types of aesthetic and other artistic interests and purposes.¹⁸ Now, with this idea in mind, I would like to point out that the

type-identifications provided by the art historian *just are* sets of aesthetic and artistic purposes. When we speak of “Impressionism,” for example, we are employing a shorthand that indicates a set of artistic and aesthetic purposes common to the paintings of Monet, Pissaro, Sisley, and others; when we speak of paintings in the “Linear Style,” we are pointing towards a set of stylistic purposes common to Michelangelo, Durer, Holbein, and others; when we talk about Romantic poetry, we are referring to a set of aesthetic and artistic interests common to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and their fellow travelers. The art historian provides the essential limitations of scope, the crucial *artistic contexts*, within which virtue-theoretical assessments are made, and it is not an exaggeration to say that he thereby makes the practice of objective art criticism possible. With art historical categories in hand, the critic can evaluate Monet’s *Water Lilies*, against the stylistic and representational purposes which it embodies and which are representative of Impressionism, or come to a judgment on Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*, given the artistic ends associated with Romantic poetry. He is able, in short, to engage in the kind of evaluative discourse that can be of use to the public, for it does not require that one share the critic’s personal experience, but relies instead upon historically realized artistic interests and purposes and thus, upon publicly observable criteria of success and failure.

The defender of aesthetic particularism may want to affect a partial retreat at this point and suggest that although gathering individual artwork under aesthetic and other artistic types may be useful in doing art history and even for purposes of critical evaluation, it is *not* useful, with respect to our ascriptions of purely *aesthetic* properties; that while we may have to turn our backs on Isenberg, we need not reject Sibley. Indeed, I could see the aesthetic particularist saying something like this: “While we may be able to infer that a painting or poem is good, by virtue its being *F* and its having a certain set of aesthetic or artistic ends,

relative to which *F*-ness constitutes success, no such reasoning is possible, when we say things like ‘*Fountain* is playful’. With respect to purely aesthetic—i.e. non-evaluative— ascriptions, our only basis for saying that something is *Q*, where *Q* is an aesthetic quality, is through direct acquaintance with its *Q*-ness.”

This argument would appear to conflate two senses of aesthetic ascription, which have been usefully identified and distinguished from one another in a recent article by Malcolm Budd.¹⁹ The first is the sense in which, by saying “*Fountain* is playful,” we intend to recount an *aesthetic experience* which we have had, to the effect that we *found Fountain* to be playful. The second is the sense in which, by way of such locutions, we intend to convey the *belief* that *Fountain* is playful,²⁰ and I would argue that the respective contents of these mental states must be construed as essentially different. Thus, while the first sense of aesthetic predication certainly requires that one be directly acquainted with *Fountain* and consequently, points in the direction of a particularist reading of the reasons I give, when I say “I found *Fountain* to be playful because....,” it is unclear why the second sense should require direct acquaintance, provided that sufficient reference has been made to *Fountain*’s context.

Suppose, for example, that I am taught in a course that *Fountain* belongs to the Dadaist movement in art and that the aims of this movement were largely countercultural; that Dadaists set themselves against authority and particularly, against official institutions and orthodoxies. Imagine, further, that I also learn in the course of my studies, that while Dadaism took many forms, a significant branch of the movement adopted a deliberately childlike stance, as its preferred choice of rebellion, because it was reacting to the overly serious demeanor of academic art (we can even imagine that in reading Ernst Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, I was struck by his description of some Dadaists as wishing to “become as little children and to cock a snook at the solemnity and pomposity of Art with a capital

‘A.’²¹) I also learn that ‘Da, Da’ means “Yes, Yes” in Russian and “rocking-horse” in French and notice, further, that when spoken, it sounds like the kinds of verbalizations that emanate from babies and toddlers. After all of this information has been conveyed, *Fountain* is then described to me: “It’s a *urinal*, turned upside-down, with the initials ‘R. Mutt’ carved into it, which Duchamp sent to an *art exhibition!*” I find it incredible that anyone could seriously suggest that I do not have good grounds upon which to believe that *Fountain* a playful work. Obviously, I have not *experienced* its playfulness myself, and of course, it is *possible* that were I to look at it, I might fail to find it playful, but to say I have no good reason at this point in time for *thinking* that it is playful is to demand an almost Cartesian level of certainty; one that would seem grossly inappropriate, given the subject under consideration.

§4

In closing, I feel compelled to emphasize that I do *not* mean to suggest, either here, or in the rest of my work in the philosophy of criticism, that there is no place for the purely personal engagement that each of us has with art. Nor is it my intention to privilege the critical engagement with art over the personal (indeed, I am inclined to agree with those who think that the latter is more important than the former, precisely because it is more intimate and thus, more personally affecting). I simply want to deny that the critical engagement with art is fundamentally personal. While a critic may also be a fan, the critical *stance* is different from that of the fan, because it requires one to stand at some distance from the individual work of art; to depersonalize one’s engagement, by subsuming the individual artwork to the relevant artistic categories and types, for the sake of producing objective critical judgments about it; judgments that are suitably interpersonal in their content and which consequently can be a part of public discourse on the arts.

The mistake that those like Sibley, Isenberg, and Mothersill make is that they treat the critic as a fan, who has been lucky enough to make a career of his fandom. The trouble with this is that at the purely personal level of one's engagement with artworks, uniqueness and particularism are *true*. The aesthetic experiences one has with and the subjective values one assigns to artworks *really are* unique. The reason why something moves you or strikes you as beautiful *really are* particular to you and to your engagement, at this particular time, with this individual work of art, and *contra* Isenberg and Sibley, there is *no* way, through writing or speech, to facilitate another person's acquaintance with the aesthetic properties and values that are born of your personal experience.²² Critical discourse is important, precisely because it facilitates fruitful, public communication about literature and the fine arts, but if the sole level of engagement with artworks possible is the personal—if the critical stance cannot be adopted—then talk about the arts can serve no purpose, other than to make personal confessions; to report one's own aesthetic experience and personal estimations of value. This strikes me as too steep a price to pay, especially if, as I have attempted to show, the kinds of generalizations over artworks required to affect the critical stance are not only available, but demonstrably useful in our engagement with the arts.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), p. 60.

² Philip Stratton-Lake, for example, has said that while “Mackie and others object to the intuitionists' epistemology on the grounds that it assumes we have some strange faculty for perceiving moral properties...it should be clear...that no such faculty is assumed by intuitionists...Intuition is not for them a way of perceiving a property, but is a way of grasping the truth of certain...propositions.” See Philip Stratton-Lake, ed., *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-Evaluations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) p. 22.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Sir David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 152-3. Ross, in the Introduction (pp. xvi-xvii), writes:

Aristotle's account begins to bring practical wisdom nearer to intuitive reason. Practical wisdom being concerned with particular actions, it is better,

he says, to know the conclusion of the practical syllogism without the major premises, than the latter without the former. In other words, he recognizes a secondary kind of practical wisdom which knows the right thing to do without reaching it by deliberative analysis. Indeed, he even approximates this secondary kind of practical wisdom to the act of sensory perception, thereby emphasizing its direct, non-ratiocinative character.

⁴ Jonathan Dancy, "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties," *Mind*, Vol. XCII (1983), pp. 545-546.

⁵ I first addressed this thesis in my paper, "Getting You to See What the Critic Sees: On Retiring a Bad Idea in the Philosophy of Criticism," delivered at the annual meeting of the British Society of Aesthetics, St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University, September 12, 2003.

⁶ Dancy, *Moral Reasons*, pp. 60-62.

⁷ See my "Critical Justification and Critical Laws," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (October 2003), esp. pp. 396-399.

⁸ Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," in Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics*, John Benson, Betty Redfern, & Jeremy Roxbee Cox, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 11.

⁹ Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (1949), p. 335.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 335-336.

¹¹ Jerrold Levinson, "Aesthetic Uniqueness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer 1980), p. 435.

¹² H.A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in *Moral Obligation: Essays and Lectures* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 17.

¹³ Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. xy.

¹⁴ The position I am taking here has many analogues with those contemporary feminist moral theories that are grounded in 'caring' rather than justice, but also goes back further to the Scottish Enlightenment and to sentiment-based moralities, like that articulated in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

¹⁵ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ See my “Normative Criticism and the Objective Value of Artworks,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 151-166.

¹⁹ Malcolm Budd, “The Acquaintance Principle,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 386-392.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

²¹ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 16th Edition (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1995) p. 601.

²² I made the case for this in my paper, “Getting You to See What the Critic Sees: On Retiring a Bad Idea in the Philosophy of Criticism,” delivered at the annual meeting of the British Society of Aesthetics, St. Edmund Hall, Oxford University, September x, 2003.