

## AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE

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### WHY AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE?

Creating and appreciating art is a rational activity. Our descriptions, responses and evaluations are not only informed by thought but are constrained and guided by various criteria. Look at a music review and it will contain characterisations of the music, what it appears to be doing, and why, as well as judgments as to why the overall effect is good, bad, or indifferent. Alternatively consider what often happens after seeing a movie with friends. We talk about why we enjoyed it (or didn't), how good it was and strive to justify our judgments where we disagree. Furthermore, we often change our minds in light of considerations raised by others and defer to the expertise of others. Thus underlying our ordinary aesthetic practices is the presumption that at least some disputes are rationally resolvable and some people do know more about certain aspects of the aesthetic realm than others, whether it be indie rock, film noir or contemporary literature. Aesthetic appreciation is also an activity that is valued highly. We enjoy aesthetic appreciation for its own sake and tend to think that engaging with art cultivates our minds in ways that add to our understanding of the world. The bewitching elegance of a painting or design can not only be absorbing in its own right but the ways in which a work is expressive, profound or insightful can enhance our understanding. Shakespeare's plays would

surely be less significant if they did not express and explore fundamental aspects of human nature in the ways they do. Why be interested in aesthetic epistemology? First, it is worth understanding when, where and why we can legitimately make art critical judgments or claims. Second, it may prove fruitful to consider what the differences and similarities in the aesthetic case are as contrasted with other areas.

## **AESTHETIC CONCEPTS**

When considering the epistemology of aesthetic judgment we need to know which features of an object are aesthetically relevant, how they relate to others and how we can come to our knowledge of them. Sibley (1959; 1965) distinguishes aesthetic knowledge from other kinds of knowledge (such as interpretative or historical knowledge). Aesthetic judgment involves the attribution of aesthetic properties and Sibley starts from considering paradigmatic aesthetic attributions such as “unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic (1959: 421).” The list ranges from formal aesthetic concepts to reactive and emotional ones and we should be careful to distinguish between the use of such terms in aesthetic and nonaesthetic ways. Now, according to Sibley, successfully picking out aesthetic features requires perception and taste. We have to apprehend the relevant features of the work *as* balanced or dynamic. It is one thing to see that Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* has thick marks of black paint across a depicted woman’s face. Any standard viewer can see that. It is, however, quite another matter to be able to see the slashing angularity of the painted marks as conveying a discomfiting sense of fingers viciously clawing away.

According to Sibley, whilst the attribution of aesthetic concepts depends on non-aesthetic features, the aesthetic character of a work can never be inferred from its non-aesthetic character. This is not to say that we can't make any inferences at all since we may be able to rule certain aesthetic attributions out (this is what Sibley means by stating that aesthetic concepts are negatively condition governed). It is hard, for example, to conceive of how a canvas evenly painted grey all over in thinly applied water-color could be gauche. Now, contra Sibley, at least some aesthetic concepts do seem positively condition governed. If a piece of music exemplifies a certain kind of contrapuntal composition then we will know that it is a fugue and possesses a certain kind of unity (Kivy 1973: 38-9; 1979). Nonetheless, the spirit of Sibley's claim is that no amount of information about a work's non-aesthetic features could rationally compel us to judge that the work possessed particular aesthetic attributes where, crucially, the attributions have at least partly evaluative components. An accurate non-aesthetic description of a song or movie will never be enough to tell you whether or not it really is elegant, vital or moving as opposed to say prosaic, banal or lifeless. It is the job of the critic to show others how to perceive what she does, using a range of methods devoted towards orientating and promoting the appropriate perception.

If aesthetic features are those picked out by taste and taste is the capacity to pick out aesthetic features, then worries about circularity arise. We might also wonder just what this seemingly mysterious faculty of taste is? (Cohen 1973) One way of understanding the claim renders it trivial. Taste could just be the capacity that all of us possess to apply aesthetic terms and as with other concepts we need education to learn how to apply them appropriately. What it is to have taste just is to be able to attribute aesthetic concepts. This is something we do all the time, from appraising the elegance

of a football pass or new outfit to judging the aesthetic character of art works. If the claim is that taste somehow goes beyond the capacity of most normal people then it either looks false or at best uninformative.

Let us assume that taste just is the ability to apprehend how aesthetic concepts apply in our experience with a work. Now none of this is to deny that there aren't better or worse aesthetic appreciators. Hume famously discusses a case from *Don Quixote* where Sancho's kinsmen pronounce a village's wine to be marred for different reasons, in particular a hint of leather and iron respectively (Hume 1993). The villagers mock them and enjoy the wine, yet when the bottom of the barrel is reached a rusty key attached to a leather thong is found. As with wine so too with art, since the refinement of certain capacities we all share is required in order to be able to grasp more completely the aesthetic character of a work. Indeed Hume goes on to characterise ideal critics as requiring not only a wealth of comparative experience but also delicacy of imagination, sympathy and freedom from prejudice or fashion. Now two questions arise. First, what knowledge is relevant to apprehending the aesthetic character of a work? Second, what role does the notion of an ideal critic play?

Art seems disanalogous from wine in at least one crucial respect. Artistic appreciation may be sensuously mediated but the aesthetic character of a work doesn't seem straightforwardly identifiable with its directly perceivable sensuous character. The model of perceptual taste looks ill fitted to the case of literature and, furthermore, even in perceptual artistic media the application of aesthetic concepts often depends on relational features. What it is for a work to belong to a certain category, have a particular style or possess particular aesthetic, expressive or cognitive features often depends on its relation to other works (Walton 1970). Consider Mondrian's mid to late phase where the geometric lines and colored blocks

have a rigid, austere quality. Given this it is appropriate to see Mondrian's *Boogie Woogie* as a riot of color with a free, dynamic vibrancy concomitant with the title's allusion to jazz. The same design produced by Miro would have been rigid and austere when compared with his typical penchant for organic squiggles squirming amidst brightly colored canvases. Relational knowledge plays a huge role in fixing a work's aesthetically relevant features and how we should appreciate them. This is compounded by the role that creative originality plays in art. Two works may be perceptually indiscernible and yet where one was created years before the other we should appreciate and value them differently, for example the later work may be derivative, a pastiche or forgery depending on the intention under which it was produced (Davies 2004; Kieran 2005: 6-46).

What role does the ideal critic play? One Humean influenced idea is that we should idealise the notion of a good critic in order to track (or even constitute) what a work's aesthetic features are, their inter-relations and thereby what a work's value is. Ideal critics possess standard human nature but in addition have honed the aspects of such required for full aesthetic appreciation. One way of attempting to fix just what these are is by identifying the capacities, skills, knowledge and attitudes required to appreciate the great works of the past. The recommendations of an ideal critic are likely to point us toward works that yield greater satisfaction than those we are likely to make for ourselves in our non-idealised situation (Levinson 2002). However, matters are not quite so straightforward. Even setting aside worries about the convergence of judgment of all ideal critics, there is reason to worry about idealisation in the intra personal case. The notion of an ideal critic stripped away from personal contingencies and history looks worrying given that much of the best criticism is personal. If the notion of an idealised counterpart to ourselves is that of a

hypothetical ranker able to take on different dispositional sets and run through them evaluating works accordingly then it is far from clear how the resultant idealising pronouncements are epistemically authoritative for us (Kieran 2008). Indeed, how could we even be in a position to know what such an ideal critic would recommend for us to appreciate? It may be much more fruitful to think in terms of a general point of view, according to which the best epistemic guide is what emerges from the pronouncements and verdicts of different actual critics across time and cultures (Sayre-McCord 1994). Good actual critics possess greater refinement and knowledge than most whilst nonetheless responding to works in ways shaped by their own psychological individualisation. What emerges across the verdicts of such is the sum of different perspectives or takes on a work. The more robust a work is in the face of such differences, the greater the indication of its worth.

### **AESTHETIC PARTICULARISM, PRINCIPLES AND REASONS**

Are there general reasons or principles that might guide and justify aesthetic judgment? Many are tempted by the thought that aesthetic thought, as contrasted with ethics, is necessarily particularist either because critical reasoning aims at perceptual apprehension, which cannot be compelled by rational justification (Hampshire 1954; Isenberg 1979; Mothersill 1984: 143), or on the grounds that aesthetically relevant features and concepts change valence across particular cases (Goldman 2006).

Whilst fine brush work is often a good making feature of a painting nonetheless in a late Titian it might undermine a work's expressivity. Consider many aesthetic concepts that have both a descriptive and evaluative aspect and it seems that the valence can change due to the particulars of the case. Terms such as gaudy, brash,

and vulgar are typically negatively valenced but they can sometimes be applied in ways that connote praise. It makes sense to praise scenes in Shakespeare and Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* for their riotous vulgarity or appreciate the gaudy, non-naturalistic colors distinctive of Fauvism. Obscenity may typically be a bad making feature in works yet in passages from Joyce's *Ulysses*, Philip Larkin's poetry or the art of Jake and Dinos Chapman it is often playful. Thus the typical evaluative valence of aesthetically thick concepts can sometimes be undermined, enhanced, neutralised or even inverted. No amount of argument can compel us to the conclusion that this is so in any particular case; rather it is a matter of coming to see how and why this is so as worked through in the context of the particular work in question.

What might explain how and why this is so? The complex inter-relationality of aesthetic features suggests aesthetic holism. If aesthetic holism is right, then justifying reasons seem to be variable in the sense that being a reason of a certain kind (e.g. 'because it is gaudy') will not necessarily underwrite one and the same justification (e.g., in so far as something is gaudy it is aesthetically disvaluable). If principles are taken to be highly general and codifiable articulations of the connection between a justifying reason and the judgment it is a reason for, then aesthetic holism seems to present a problem for the idea that there are aesthetic principles.

Despite such considerations there are those who have argued that there are general aesthetic reasons (Beardsley 1962; Sibley 1983; Shelley 2007) or principles (Conolly and Haydar 2003; Dickie 1988; 2006). How might an argument for such claims proceed? One place to start from is the intuition that any aesthetic reason requires a normative basis to explain it. If this were not the case then it is hard to see what if anything could serve to rescue aesthetic justification from being a random and arbitrary matter. Furthermore, aesthetic reasons do seem at the very least to be

implicitly general in form. Whilst it is true that any adequate critical appreciation must attend to the particular ways a work realises its aesthetic features, nonetheless reasoned justification of evaluations has an apparently general structure. What is it that makes Balzac, Dickens or Tolstoy great writers? Part of the explanation lies in the richness of the imagery as well as their truth to life: the rich metaphorical characterisation that draws out the nature of and inter-actions amongst human emotions, character and social milieu. How they do so differs markedly in particulars, yet this should not detract from the recognition that part of what explains why they are valued so highly are reasons that are general in form and holds across the differences between them. This is not itself sufficient to show that there must be aesthetic principles. What is further required is an argument to suggest either that a) principles can be arrived at from generalisations arrived at on the basis of actual experience and thought experiment (Dickie 1988; 2006) or more strongly b) that the normative basis of aesthetic reasons depends upon the existence of aesthetic principles (Conolly and Haydar 2003). After all, someone might think, where else could the normative force come from?

Now one thing to bear in mind here is that we are primarily interested in the epistemic thesis. Even if there are general aesthetic reasons or principles it does not thereby automatically follow that we must use them in order to justify aesthetic judgments. Work in linguistics, the science of perception, neuroscience and cognitive science suggests there might be underlying principled naturalistic explanations as to why we appreciate works as we do. There is evidence to suggest that certain literary techniques involving heightened processing costs function in particular ways that enhance patterning effects or salience (Sperber and Wilson 1995) and in the visual arts it has been argued that studying perceptual processing yields principles that

explain how and why we take pleasure in certain visual structures (Ramachandran 1999; Kawabata and Zeki 2004). Yet even if such approaches are genuinely explanatory it does not automatically follow that the resultant reasons or principles are of the right kind to feature as justifications for aesthetic evaluations. After all, it is not obvious that such principles are the right kind to feature in art critical appreciation and evaluation since any straightforward causal story cannot make room for the normative aspect of aesthetic judgment. What is required to make progress here is both conceptual work on the nature of our aesthetic intuitions and the disentangling of the multiple factors that underlie and contribute to aesthetic appreciation. Furthermore, many factors that figure in appreciation concern the intentional content of the prescribed propositional attitudes. What justifies or merits many of our cognitive-affective responses to works depends upon both the artistic conventions involved and the criteria that govern the relevant emotional or, more broadly, propositional attitudes concerned. Pity, for example, may be diminished to the extent it is judged undeserved or naive sentimentality in a work might undermine judgments about its emotional depth or truth to life.

Insofar as reasons underwrite our aesthetic judgments it would seem that, contra Beardsley, they can be both general and context-sensitive, where the reasons are taken to be defeasible ones—i.e., *prima facie* or *pro tanto* (Bender 1995). This is perfectly consistent with the recognition that inter-relations to other features means that the *prima facie* goodness or badness of some feature can be overridden, trumped or undermined given its context. The technical mastery of painting and compositional structure might well be *prima facie* good making features of a painting, and yet the sentimentality as expressed in some particular work might be strong enough to render the work mediocre and banal. Furthermore, it could be argued, wherever there are

valence switches this must be for a principled reason on pain of arbitrariness. Thus, for example, fine brushwork may be a *prima facie* good making feature in painting but in a late Van Gogh, late Titian or Jackson Pollock it would cut against a work's expressiveness. Valence variability or change in particular contexts can be explained in a way that does not undermine the applicability of general reasons. Thus the generality of critical reasons looks secure and might yet provide a basis from which to argue for aesthetic principles. After all the less descriptively fine-grained the relevant thick concept is and the more general the applicability of the justifying reason, the more it might begin to look as if we are nearing something close to an aesthetic principle (e.g., 'insofar as something is sentimental its value as a work of art is lessened'). Nonetheless, even if this were the case, it would not follow that there are is a unique lexically ordered set of principles. After all, even if aesthetic principles could be secured further argument would be required to show that there are any higher-order principles which determine how they inter-relate – a Herculean looking task especially if there are permissible differences in the prioritization of distinct aesthetic sensibilities or values. Alternatively, there might be some reason to think that a mixed view holds, namely that whilst there might be some aesthetic principles not all justifying reasons advert to or depend on such.

## **AESTHETIC TESTIMONY AND SCEPTICISM ABOUT AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE**

It has seemed to many that we cannot gain aesthetic justification or knowledge from anything other than our own experience. This can't be true for all aesthetic judgments. After all, we can make description based warranted attributions without experiencing a work. If we read the Cliffs notes on a particular novel we can gain warrant for

making all sorts of claims, for example who created a work, when, what style it is in, its structure and themes. The interesting claim is that we cannot judge the good-making features of a work without experiencing it. This amounts to “a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics, which may be called the Acquaintance Principle, and which insists that judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments 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” (Wollheim: 233).

Now for some, such as Kant, there are no limits within which aesthetic testimony may be transmissible (Kant: S. 33). Yet, as has been pointed out (Budd 2003), this is just because Kant defined aesthetic judgment as being necessarily based on a hedonic response to the object judged. Thus whilst we cannot aesthetically judge (construed in Kant’s terms) an object without experiencing it, this does not preclude aesthetic knowledge about an object’s value from being transmissible. It has been argued that in the aesthetic case, unlike other areas, we do not have apriori reason to take warrant to be transmitted via testimony but nonetheless testimony can provide an evidential basis for justification (Hopkins 2000). The basic idea is that if someone says that they witnessed a certain event yesterday or was morally outrageous, we should believe them unless other countervailing considerations emerge. If someone says that a film was good, who knows? Unless, that is, we have additional reason to believe the testifier. One reason for holding that aesthetic testimony is weaker as contrasted with other realms arises from the assumption that there are different aesthetic sensibilities. This cannot be Kant’s position. Kant famously held that aesthetic judgment proper depended upon the operations of the faculties of imagination and understanding, ones we all must share as rational embodied agents.

Nonetheless perhaps what explains the weakness of aesthetic testimony involves the indexing of aesthetic judgment to distinct aesthetic sensibilities. Yet simplistic relativism about the aesthetic is problematic and it is unclear why sophisticated expressivism or anti-realism about aesthetics would explain what is supposed to be distinctively problematic about aesthetic testimony (Meskin 2007). Furthermore, even granting relativism, it is unclear why testimony could not transmit justification at least relative to whatever the relevant framework or sensibility implicitly invoked is. It has been argued that aesthetic testimony is variegated and in some areas more unreliable than elsewhere due to folks' presumption of relativism as often expressed by the phrase 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' (Meskin 2004). Indeed the unreliability of such might be alternatively explained or compounded by a range of other factors ranging from the amount of relevant relational knowledge required and aesthetic expertise to the easy conflation of what we like with what is aesthetically good (Meskin 2004; 2007). One interesting parallel between ethics and aesthetics when it comes to testimony is that there seems to be something importantly lacking about an agent who gains his ethical/aesthetical knowledge (assuming there is such a thing) via testimony. Instead, these are things which, intuitively, one should (ultimately at least) ascertain for oneself. One possible explanation for this is that what we seek in these domains is not merely knowledge but understanding. Understanding, however, cannot be gained passively through the testimony of experts.

It has been argued that the aesthetic is particularly susceptible to snobbery due to a range of factors including some of those cited above (Kieran 2010). To take just one consideration where pleasure is taken in engaging with a work, we have strong defeasible reason to value it and thus to judge that it is good. Given standard appreciators and conditions, defeasibility arises due to two considerations: a) whether

an appreciator is suitably informed and discriminating, and b) whether an appreciator identifies and responds appropriately to the aesthetically relevant features. However, we are often terrible at identifying in aesthetic appreciation when, where and why our pleasure is or may be a result of aesthetically irrelevant bias. Empirical studies suggest that factors we are unconscious of ranging from familiarity to status cues influence the pleasure taken in appreciation. Frederic Brochet's infamous wine tasting experiments bring this out nicely. In one experiment Brochet used the same middling Bordeaux wine and decanted it into two different bottles. One bottle bore all the marks of an ordinary vin de table whilst the other was a smart grand cru bottle. Out of a sample of 56 oenology students only twelve judged the wine from the cheap bottle to be worth drinking whilst forty judged the wine in the more expensive looking bottle to be worth drinking. It was the same wine. This simply reflects the extent to which expectations can be cued up and influenced by aesthetically irrelevant factors we are wholly unaware of. It is no surprise that multinational corporations spend huge amounts of money on marketing and brand placement for precisely this reason.

Intuitively it seems that if we are judging or responding snobbishly then we lack internal justification for aesthetic claims and we are not in a legitimate position to claim aesthetic knowledge [is this true though? Won't it seem to us that X is better than Y, and won't it seem to us that we are good at making these judgements? In a purely internal sense, then, one could argue that any beliefs so formed are very reasonable, even despite their unreliable basis). We are judging a work to be good or making critical claims about a work for the wrong sorts of reasons (i.e., because doing so marks us out as superior in some way relative to some group). Whatever else is true, any adequate account of aesthetic appreciation ought to preclude the idea that something is aesthetically good just in virtue of a certain class or group's perceived

social status. Given the pervasiveness of snobbery and the difficulty of knowing whether or not someone is being snobbish we get a skeptical problem – how can we know whether or not any particular aesthetic response or judgment really is justified?

One way of answering the challenge appeals to reliability. What matters is the reliability of the faculties and processes involved in arriving at aesthetic judgments. Snobbish judgment might tend toward error but it is not necessarily mistaken and snobs can acquire justification. Tracking the judgments of acknowledged critics and working at aesthetic appreciation might put the snob in a position to make, reliably, the right sorts of aesthetic judgments and claims. An alternative virtue theoretic approach emphasizes the ways in which snobbish motivation constitutes an appreciative vice which thereby undermines the epistemic status of the snob's beliefs (Kieran 2010). Even where snobbery reliably arrives at the right judgments this will be so for the wrong sort of reasons. Hence a snob's achievement is not epistemically praiseworthy in the way in which the judgment of a true appreciator is. Furthermore the true appreciator's knowledge connects up to appreciation in the right sort of way. Aesthetic knowledge matters primarily for the ways in which it inflects and feeds back into our appreciation.

## **AESTHETIC COGNITIVISM**

Aesthetic epistemology is not just concerned with knowledge about aesthetics and art but the ways in which we can gain knowledge through our experiences with art. Plato famously thought that art could afford no knowledge whatsoever. In part the claim arose as a function of Plato's metaphysics, according to which works are only imperfect imitations of actual objects, which themselves are only imperfect

instantiations of abstract forms. Art, for Plato, is two removes from and thus doubly distortive of reality. Nonetheless, Plato's skeptical worry can be articulated without advertent to his distinctive metaphysics.

When engaging with art works we entertain imaginings about make-believe worlds. The artistic techniques and conventions deployed prompt particular imaginings and thereby shape our responses. Artists need not have any great knowledge about what they represent nor need appreciators be interested in what is true or false. When responding to *Dracula* or a painterly landscape it is beside the point to complain that such an entity could not exist or that the landscape never existed as it was painted. Games of make-believe need not aim at or fix on to reality. To the extent we are impressed by this line of reasoning it might be thought that art can only have at best an accidental relation to knowledge. Furthermore, to the extent that art is accidentally related to knowledge what it does reveal can only be trivial commonplaces. Nash's *We are Making a New World* conveys desolation at the horrific waste of human life in WWI and Balzac's novels convey the cynicism of people preoccupied by social calculation, but do we really acquire any worthwhile knowledge from them? The propositions that vast loss of life in war is tragic or that preoccupation with social esteem lends itself to cynicism are hardly enlightening in any deep sense. The propositions involved are either truisms or we are prepared to assent to them only to the extent to which we are already inclined to believe them independently of and prior to experiencing the works in question (Stolnitz 1992; Gibson 2003).

A quick response to this challenge is to point out that many art works are epistemically constrained with respect to truth (Friend 2007). It is integral to certain kinds of literary essays, non-fiction novels, still life painting and portraiture that they

are constrained by and aim to inform us about how things actually are. Hence the scandal when Misha Defonseca's holocaust memoirs and James Frey's autobiographical novel turned out to be fraudulent. Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* can tell us what happened to six relatives during the Holocaust and much about his attempt to uncover their story, which in turn suggests much about the nature of memory and our relations to the past. Photographers like Martin Parr can show us what life was like for dying industrial communities in northern England at the turn of the last century or what life is like for the internationally wealthy at the start of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, such a move leaves the charge unanswered as applied to fictional works.

What if anything can we learn from fictional works? One option is to concede that whilst we cannot gain knowledge from fiction nonetheless art works can get us to care about the truths they concern. It is one thing to know in the abstract that racism is bad, it is quite another to read *To Kill A Mocking Bird* and be moved to care about its perniciousness. Another option emphasises the extent to which fictional works may afford practical knowledge, phenomenal knowledge or even knowledge of ways of apprehending others that are not wholly reducible to straightforward propositions. Literary narratives, for example, may be particularly well suited to showing us how to apprehend morally relevant features of particular situations (Nussbaum 1990). A more direct approach argues that fictional works can and do afford propositional knowledge (Carroll 1998; 2002; Gaut 2006; 2007; Kieran 2005; Stock 2007). A modest version of the strategy holds that artistic narratives can clarify the nature and inter-relations of our beliefs and presumptions that we hold. We might all recognise that desire for social esteem does not necessarily lead to happiness, but reading *Anna Karenin* may show how it is that the desire for social esteem can lead people to act in ways that are

self-deceived, that this in turn can undermine the capacity to be true to one's self and hence how valuing social esteem can lead away from rather than towards true happiness. A stronger version of this strategy holds that in addition to clarification more radical cognitive revisions are possible, on the grounds that works are capable of revealing genuine insights to us that might cut against the grain of our prior beliefs through utilising strategies such as imaginative identification.

It is worth pointing out that we can learn straightforwardly from works how some actual people (e.g., artists) experience, conceive of and respond to the world or how some possible people could do so (e.g., where a work's narrator is not to be straightforwardly identified with its creator). At least to the extent that we are impressed by the thought that writers and artists are often more perceptually or emotionally discriminating than most, this looks like it should be enough to render art cognitively significant. Furthermore, given that we learn from experience there is reason to hold that we can also learn from imaginative experience (Currie 1995; Kieran 1996; Gaut 2007). A standard way of trying to find out how one would feel in a certain kind of situation is by imagining oneself to be in such a scenario. If that is right, then works can provide particularly complex and rich ways of exercising our imaginations in epistemically significant ways or even finding out about one's actual or possible desires and dispositions. None of this is to claim that there is a straightforward relationship between what we can imagine, conceivability and knowledge (Stokes 2007). Yet at least to the extent that we hold there is some such relationship, then that will be the extent to which we can hold that what works can get us to imagine may show us something about how things could be or indeed are.

Thus far we have focused primarily upon the contents of beliefs we can glean from works and worries about the justification of such. A rather different strategy

looks elsewhere for art's cognitive significance. One route involves emphasising the extent to which the cognitive significance of works is not reducible to knowledge but is closely related to understanding. Works may draw out how our beliefs relate to human activity, practices and the ways in which such things have significance for us (Gibson 2007) or cultivate our imaginative understanding of the significance of certain beliefs (Kieran 1996). Another route stresses the exercise of a range of cognitive capacities and virtues involved in art appreciation (Kieran 2005; Lopes 2005). Attending to Monet's Rouen cathedral painting series, where each picture depicts the cathedral from distinct viewpoints with markedly different lighting effects, may cultivate the capacity to perceive small visual differences and grasp how they can have striking effects upon the overall impression. This kind of account can be broadened out with respect to all art forms. Reading Sappho's poetry alongside Catullus's transliterations can cultivate greater discrimination with respect to minute differences in literary form, allusion and thus language in general. Indeed engaging with works might develop not just our discriminative capacities but broader intellectual virtues ranging from the patience, self-discipline and humility to the imaginativeness required to do justice to and appreciate a work.

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