

ACQUAINTANCE PRINCIPLE

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It. *Principio di familiarità*; Fr. *Le principe de fréquentation*; Germ. *Prinzip der Bekanntschaft*; Span. *Principio de familiaridad*. The term “acquaintance” denotes a relation of direct awareness of an item, a relation in which something is “presented” or simply “given” to the subject who experiences it, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any other beliefs. The acquaintance principle maintains that aesthetic knowledge must be acquired through acquaintance, i.e. through first-hand experience of the object judged, and thus cannot be either inferred from general rules or obtained from others’ description of the object.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND AESTHETICS

In epistemology, the most important view on the notion of acquaintance was that offered by Bertrand Russell, who introduced the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. The former is intended by Russell as foundational or non-inferential knowledge because it depends on one’s acquaintance with the object itself, or with properties of or facts about the object, and not on any further knowledge of truths, whereas the latter, in contrast, always involves some further knowledge of truths for support (Russell 1912: Ch. 5). According to the majority of advocates of acquaintance theory, any belief that is an instance of non-foundational or inferential justification, albeit licit, ultimately depends on foundational knowledge of truths acquired by acquaintance.

In aesthetics, a consistent number of philosophers accorded an even more central role to acquaintance by considering it as the only legitimate source of aesthetic beliefs, as is clearly stated in what Richard Wollheim called “the acquaintance principle”: “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 1980: 233). Michael Tanner (2003) later extended the range of application of the acquaintance principle to comprise judgments of aesthetic properties, to the extent that first-hand experience is taken to be essential and unavoidable to assert the

presence of aesthetic properties in an object and to understand the meaning of the terms employed to designate them.

Although its official formulation is relatively recent, the acquaintance principle is firmly grounded in philosophical tradition. Wollheim refers to it as a “well entrenched principle”, whose roots go back to 18th century philosophy, pre-eminently Immanuel Kant’s third *Critique*, where the German philosopher states that an aesthetic judgment – one directed towards an object’s beauty – is essentially subjective, being grounded on one’s reflections about one’s hedonic response to the item judged. Hence, according to Kant, “whenever a subject offers a judgment as proof of his taste, we demand that he judge for himself” (Kant 1790: § 32). In a similar vein, Alan Tormey, in his paper *Critical Judgments* (1973), will later claim that “in art, unlike the law, we do not admit judgments in the absence of direct or immediate experience of the object of the judgment”. As for Tanner’s suggestion that the acquaintance principle operates for aesthetic properties in general, it is indebted to Frank Sibley’s view of aesthetic properties as irreducible to those structural and sensible properties on which they nonetheless depend, a view which entails that one’s assessment of the aesthetic character of an object requires the exercise of one’s taste or aesthetic sensitivity in the experience of that object (Sibley 1965).

THE CONTEMPORARY AESTHETIC DEBATE

By insisting that a person’s aesthetic judgments, to be warranted, must be based on his/her experience of the item judged – where such experience is not to be intended as strictly perceptual – the acquaintance principle can be read as implying the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy, which rules out, from the domain of the legitimate sources of aesthetic belief, both the testimony of others and the reliance on inference from an item’s non-aesthetic properties and, consequently, from any generalizations connecting the ascription of a particular aesthetic property with a definite set of non-aesthetic properties. Those who endorse such limitations on the method for forming aesthetic belief are usually called pessimists, while those who don’t accept the acquaintance principle and its correlated principle of autonomy are classified as optimists.

Although it is often considered as the dominant strain in ordinary thinking about aesthetics, pessimism has been subjected to much criticism over the last two decades. Malcolm Budd (2003) argued that direct engagement with a work is required only if we are to *appreciate* an aesthetic quality – e.g. gracefulness – as it is realized in the work, while we can know at second hand that the work *possesses* the property of gracefulness, assuming that our informer is a reliable one. The issue of reliability is at the core of Aaron Meskin’s defence of optimism. Indeed, he claims, the key difference between aesthetic and mundane testimony is more practical than theoretical: as a matter of fact, it is extremely difficult to find persons with the requisite training and knowledge, especially with respect to contemporary art, and this motivates our tendency to resist forming belief on the basis of the testimony of others (Meskin 2004). A more optimist view on aesthetic testimony is that offered by Brian Laetz (2008), who observes that we are not so much reluctant as selective: we accept aesthetic reports only “from some people on some topics”, and this is no different from how we treat testimony in non-aesthetic (moral, scientific, politic, etcetera) cases.

Moreover, there is sociological evidence to the effect that we are strongly influenced by, and sometimes demand, the verdicts of others on artistic and aesthetic matters.

As for the pessimist position, its most prominent contemporary exponent is surely Robert Hopkins, who clearly states that, with respect to testimony, aesthetic matters differ in kind, and not merely in degree, from most others. While allowing that, under certain circumstances pertaining to the informant's reliability, testimony may be a source of aesthetic knowledge, he suggests that there is some non-epistemic principle or norm active in the aesthetic case – the acquaintance principle being the most plausible candidate for such a norm – which does not govern more mundane instances of testimony and which renders it illegitimate to make use of that knowledge to form an aesthetic belief (Hopkins 2011). Hopkins's "unusability view" can meet the challenge of the so-called "recommendation cases" – e.g. when I take a friend's recommendation to go to a film and it is rational to do so – by explaining them as special instances where the acquaintance principle lapses only to reassert itself once I have seen the movie myself and can form my own aesthetic judgment, which is what mostly matters. However, it has been observed that there are cases where the testimony of others doesn't merely redirect our attention towards certain features of an item, but may bring us to learn something about the item's aesthetic value, especially when the testifier is someone whose ability and competence we trust (Thi Nguyen 2017).

The disagreement between pessimist and optimists turns, in key part, on conflicting intuitions over whether in particular cases it would be legitimate to accept aesthetic testimony as a basis for our aesthetic judgments (Hopkins 2011). In order to resolve such conflicts, Daniel Whiting (2015) proposed distinguishing between bare testimony, which involves thin evaluative concepts such as good or excellent, and clothed testimony, involving thick aesthetic concepts (e.g. cool, brutal, delightful) and the non-aesthetic properties on which they depend. He goes on to argue that only the latter kind of testimony might provide aesthetic knowledge, while as regards the former pessimism holds true. According to C. Thi Nguyen (2017), aesthetic properties (e.g. gracefulness) can have both a subjective component (e.g. the feeling of gracefulness) and a cognitive component (e.g. an object's meriting being found beautiful). With respect to the latter, Thi Nguyen claims, no requirement for personal acquaintance applies, and this means that knowledge by testimony is permitted: hence, we should be pessimists about the subjective property of gracefulness and optimists about the objective property of merit. Although they may offer a good explanation of why we oscillate between refusal and acceptance of aesthetic testimony, such mixed accounts restrict the acquaintance principle's range of application in a way that not everyone will be disposed to endorse.

Another challenge to the acquaintance principle's validity is represented by the fact that sometimes direct scrutiny of a reproduction or copy can serve as an adequate basis for a recognition of at least some of an item's or artwork's aesthetic qualities (Livingston 2003: 262-263). The task of establishing what can serve as an adequate surrogate for an artwork is not an easy one. The most obvious candidates for this role are photographs and accurate reproductions, as far as visual works of art are concerned. Hopkins (2006) has suggested that even by visual imagining an object we might grasp – but not savour – its aesthetic aspects. Amir Konigsberg (2012) has gone much further by stating that several contemporary works – mainly

belonging to conceptual art: think of, e.g., Duchamp's *Fountain*, Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* and Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* – we can not only come to assess, but even fully understand and appreciate their aesthetic content, if there is any, through reading or listening to the accurate descriptions of the author's intention, the work's procedure of public presentation, the techniques of displacement employed, as well as of its structural configuration, irrespective of the experience that such descriptions lead to. However, if we allow mere descriptions or, as Andrea Sauchelli (2016) has put it, "linguistic reformulations of the medium", to be considered as adequate surrogates for a work's aesthetic qualities, we do so at the cost of losing the specifically emergent character of such qualities, which is due to their being the outcome of a unique, irreducible combination and interpenetration of structural, semantic, and contextual base-elements, and which the acquaintance principle is intended to capture (Focosi, *forthcoming*).

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