Categories and Appreciation – A Reply to Sackris

Ole Martin Skilleås · Douglas Burnham

Published online: 7 August 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

In his article “Category Independent Aesthetic Experience: The Case of Wine” in this journal, David Sackris presents arguments against Kendall Walton’s view in the famous article “Categories of Art.” He claims, with support in an argument about the immediate qualities of great wines, that for some kinds of aesthetic appreciation specific category knowledge is not necessary. We welcome the idea that wine appreciation is an aesthetic practice, and more importantly the view that the features of wine appreciation might shed light on, or even transform our understanding of aesthetic experience more generally. The article also draws welcome attention to the role of knowledge in aesthetic experience. We do, however, have some misgivings about some of the arguments Sackris puts forward. Here we are going to focus on two problematic aspects. The first is a problem with the scope of his argument against Walton, and the second relates to an equivocation at the heart of Sackris’s use of the term ‘appreciation.’ For Sackris’s arguments to have any force against Walton, the latter’s categories have to be specific and require knowledge of that work and its context. We think there are good reasons for thinking that Walton’s categories may be more fundamental than Sackris assumes.

The second problem with Sackris’s line of reasoning has to do with his use of the term ‘appreciation.’ He does not define or analyze it, and important aspects of what he argues depend on an equivocation. At the core of his argument we find the syllogism that the epiphany experience of wines are instances of aesthetic appreciation, and since these experiences are had by novices who do not have categories to apply to their experiences, aesthetic appreciation is possible without categories. The validity of this argument rests on ‘appreciation’ and ‘aesthetic experience’ being uniform in the epiphany case and in competent aesthetic appreciation. We think a gradation is more likely, and this in turn raises questions about where to draw the line.

1 Walton’s Categories and Naïveté

Let us take a moment to review the argument provided in Walton’s classic paper. First of all, although some of the language Walton uses there may be ambiguous, it is nevertheless clear that he is pushing for a strong sense of the necessity of aesthetic categories in aesthetic perception. They are ‘essential’ and our judgments rest upon them in ‘an absolutely fundamental way’. The categories are conditions of the possibility of such perception – and this Kantian move is presumably why he chooses the term ‘category’ in the first place. What Walton does not do is discuss ‘appreciation’. He stops at aesthetic perception, by which is meant a sustained viewing of something as aesthetically valuable or successful, which presumably (and plausibly) he takes to be the key or founding element within appreciation. The closest that he comes to appreciation is perhaps in the idea that practice or experience is required for aesthetic perception (‘we must learn to perceive the work’). That is, the aesthetic categories are not to be understood simply as a knowing that, but also as knowing how, which requires some degree of ‘training.’ As we put it above, Walton argues that learning and applying appropriate categories involves training in how to listen to music, rather than sound, or view paintings rather than a field of colors. In any case, it is this Kantian idea of conditions of possibility that makes Walton’s argument open to the possibility of an objection akin to the one Sackris offers. That is, if an aesthetic perception is possible in the absence of any prior categorization, then Walton’s argument must fall.

Secondly, what Walton is explicitly arguing against is a view of aesthetic experience which insists on its essential naïveté. Although it seems obvious that paintings are there to be looked at, and music there to be listened to, it does not follow that aesthetic experience requires nothing but such looking or listening. On the other hand, Walton wants to avoid the opposite extreme, which is that historical, cultural or biographical information substitutes itself for perception. Instead, the argument is that aesthetic perception is and must be an informed perception. Our aesthetic categories are what permit the seeing to be a seeing something as aesthetic. Walton explains this with the notion of Gestalt. Aesthetic perception is not a

---

2 Walton, p. 522.
3 Ibid, p. 535.
judgment in the sense of a conclusion reached by a process of inference from individual properties, elements or parts. Rather, it is a seeing as, as a whole, without some prior analytic or synthetic cognitive operation. Our categories are necessary for aesthetic perception, but are not part of or a stage in that perception.

Now, there is naïve in an absolute sense and there is naïve in a relative sense. Someone with no prior experience of some particular type of object is absolutely naïve with respect to that object; their experience of it will be naïve. However, we could also say that someone with incomplete experience or knowledge of a particular type of object – someone, that is, who is an amateur, a dabbler but not an expert – is relatively naïve. Walton is clear on this issue. His concern is with the former type, particularly with an account of aesthetics that seems to assume that simple seeing or hearing is all that one needs. “Aesthetic properties, then, are not to be found in works themselves in the straightforward way that colors and shapes or pitches and rhythms are” – that is, not in a way accessible to someone naive in the first, stronger sense.\(^4\) The second, relative type of naïveté is much less important, for it is obvious that an amateur has available to him or her, and employs, some categorization of the perceived object. Thus, Walton can describe the difference between amateur and expert in terms of the clarification or propriety of the categories being employed, and the extent of the perceptual training this involves. Walton in fact argues that, in most cases, ‘we have been trained unwittingly’\(^5\); for example we have acquired the ability to ‘see paintings as paintings’ rather than as panels inexplicably nailed to walls. Walton thus comes close to saying that true naïvete is in fact quite rare. It follows that for Sackris’ argument to work against Walton’s position in the article, the type of wine experience he uses as evidence must be naïve in the first sense – of someone who is completely new to wine. So, we need to ask ‘who is this naïve wine drinker?’

What is an absolutely naïve experience of wine like? Universally repellent. The acids sear and the alcohol burns, and the tannins in a red wine parch. Even the greediest of household pets will rarely go near a glass of wine, and children likewise. Someone who has developed tolerances to these repellent sensations is no longer naïve. Experiments have been conducted that show that, provided they are not deceived about the nature of the task, even amateurs can tell the difference blindfolded between red and white.\(^6\) An inference from this experiment is that participants both know and use the categorization of wine according to its color. Even relative amateurs employ categories in their wine drinking: wine in distinction from grape juice, red versus white, sweet versus dry wines, possibly preferred grape varieties or countries of origin, and no doubt many others. From this we can conclude that very few people are completely naïve in the sense required for Walton’s categories not to be in operation at the epiphany experience with wine. In other words, the kind of wine drinker that Sackris needs for his argument to work against Walton – someone who is fully naïve, but also capable of not just a pleasurable experience, but indeed an aesthetic experience, with wine – does not exist.

\(^5\) Ibid, p. 535.
2 Epiphanies and Appreciation

Sackris, however, is primarily out to discredit a view he has identified in the writings of Barry C. Smith, Jonathan Cohen and Cain Todd – that the experienced taster will derive more from the tasting of wine than the novice. Against this view he primarily uses Barry C. Smith’s account of the wine epiphany experience in *Questions of Taste*.

It is clear from this that the person who has the epiphany experience is not really a novice with wine, but rather someone who has little or no experience with truly great wines. This is a major difference. Smith writes that “until that moment they had simply drunk wine, noticing some to be more pleasing than others.” But can he still claim that the not-so-naïve drinker who has the epiphany experience with a wine “realized its greatness by appreciating its aesthetic qualities”? The issue here is that the term ‘appreciation’ is ambiguous, and it is our contention that Sackris exploits this ambiguity to form his argument. The relevant ambiguities are at work in Sackris’ claim that “there are some immediate and appropriate ways to apprehend the aesthetic properties of at least some kinds of work despite the fact that one may lack category knowledge concerning the work.” Does one apprehend aesthetic properties in the same way as one apprehends notes of taste, smell, astringency and so on? If not, what is/are the relationship(s) between the latter and the former? Moreover, what determines that they are aesthetic properties, and whether they are ‘appropriate’?

Walton’s fundamental categories go ‘all the way down’, but the naive taster has to satisfy some criteria distinguishing aesthetic properties from other kinds of properties. A contrast may be in order to bring out what is or may be at stake here. Contrast the wine epiphany with another even more common epiphany – the first kiss. This is quite often well remembered by many of us, and it did for sure transcend our typical experiences in a wondrous fashion. However, one hesitates to call it aesthetic even though it was appreciated at the time. ‘Appreciate’ thus has two meanings: (i) the experience of pleasure which, even if it is experienced for the first time, remains just pleasure; and (ii) aesthetic appreciation the aim of which is not pleasure *per se* (although pleasure may be one of its most common accompaniments) but rather the recognition and contemplation of aesthetic qualities. Indeed, there is a third sense of appreciation (iii) which may be relevant here, as in when I say ‘I can appreciate why some people might consider X to be a great work, but I disagree.’ This third sense is to understand something, but not to experience it as forceful or true. Sackris employs this ambiguity; his various uses of the term could variously be translated variously, from ‘like’, ‘like a lot,’ ‘value,’ all the way to ‘judge to be aesthetically successful.’

---

7 Sackris, pp. 113–114.
9 Ibid, p. 52.
10 Sackris, p. 114.
11 Ibid, p. 112.
In which sense of the word ‘appreciation’ is the epiphany experience, properly understood, to be classified? Now, Sackris borrows Smith’s bare account, but others have had more to say about wine epiphanies both in the context of philosophical aesthetics and from an empirical perspective. Jancis Robinson, a Master of Wine and one of the world’s best known authorities on wine, described her own wine epiphany in her book The Confessions of a Wine Lover. Her epiphany was with a Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoureuses 1959 shared with a friend back in 1970. Her story reveals what actually happens in a wine epiphany. “Here was a wine that positively demanded attention. […] that wine did make me realize that wine can enhance life for far more and nobler reasons than its alcohol content alone. […] This was brazen and fleshy and each mouthful entranced me, even if I found it impossible to describe. I doubt we even tried to discuss the wine other than to grunt and drool.”

According to Robinson they were both amateur (in the sense of relatively naïve) wine drinkers at the moment of the epiphany, but this we have already established. The question remaining is whether or not this and similar moments discovering an oenological nirvana amounts to the appreciation of aesthetic properties. Note the difference in this report from Jancis Robinson about a 2010 Chambolle-Musigny Les Amoreuses, which is of course the same terroir though a much later vintage as her epiphany: “Really quite firm and dense with haunting top notes. Very rich and majestic. Lots of fruit on the front palate and then great structure behind. May always be a bit of a charmer. Crackling with tension and depth. Very fine tannins here – one of the few Roumier wines where one is aware of the tannin. Very neat finish.” The difference is striking. Here is an expert member of the wine appreciation community doing her utmost not only to judge something but also to guide others towards an experience with it. At her command is the full palette of wine-appropriate aesthetic concepts (e.g. ‘top notes,’ ‘structure,’ ‘fine tannins,’ ‘finish’), as well as precisely determined aesthetic categories (‘Roumier wines’), and all of it nuanced with some metaphors that look vague but function quite precisely in such discourse (‘haunting,’ ‘majestic,’ ‘charmer’).

The epiphany moment in 1970 gave Robinson an experiential glimpse of possibilities, that there was definitely a range of experiences to be had with wine of which she had not so far been aware of. Robinson and her companion did enjoy the wine for sure, and enjoy it in a manner different from their previous modes of enjoying wines – but is this appreciation? Do they perceive aesthetic properties? In other words: are there any significant differences between appreciation in the sense of a delightful experience, and aesthetic appreciation? Between the delight of the first kiss and an appreciation a masterpiece of Rembrandt? Sackris will have to deny that there is if his argument is to work.

It is no doubt the case that those, like Robinson in 1970, who have epiphany experiences are not complete novices. They do, however, discover a whole new

---

12 Burnham and Skilleås, pp. 18, 83–84, 103 and 125–127.
range of opportunities through the epiphany – such is its impact.\textsuperscript{15} The possibility of such a different range of experiences may well be ensured by the fact that anyone undergoing an epiphany experience is likely to have brought not just aesthetically relevant categories (the kinds of training that, according to Walton, we all ‘unwittingly’ receive), but properly aesthetic concepts from some other aesthetic field or practice to the encounter with wine. Aesthetic concepts may thus be available even to the neophyte. The notions of life-enhancing and noble in Robinson’s 1970 account suggest such a transference. These are precisely the kinds of concepts that our culture uses to describe the value of art, and to differentiate \textit{in the abstract} between experiences with art and ordinary forms of liking. Equally important may be the words “brazen and fleshy and each mouthful entranced me.” Robinson was, so to speak, stopped in her tracks by this wine – it forced her attention, forced her to dwell on each mouthful. Again, this is a dominant traditional account of the encounter with art, it fascinates us and we thus dwell upon it. And yet, it was ‘impossible to describe.’ Robinson is writing very carefully here, of an event that took place a quarter century previously, trying not to retrospectively employ her formidable wine expertise to understand the moment. The implication is that ‘brazen and fleshy’ are not so much aesthetic descriptions of the wine as descriptions of this forcing of attention; that is, of the \textit{difference} between this experience and what she had experienced with wine previously.

So, Robinson’s account relies upon concepts that were probably borrowed from other aesthetic domains, music or painting perhaps. Not only, then, was her epiphany not absolutely naive because it employed aesthetically relevant categories of wine, but it was also not naive in the sense that it employed borrowed aesthetic concepts or skills of appreciation.

Clearly, there is not an unbridgeable gap between liking a wine and appreciating it – and it is here that the epiphany experience has some explanatory force. To say, as Sackris does, that “there must be a zone of reliable appreciation that does not depend on familiarity with categories” raises without answering a whole series of questions. For example, what is ‘reliable appreciation’?\textsuperscript{16} Is it Robinson’s grunting and drooling, or is it professional tasting notes? How, in the absence of communicability, does a notion like ‘reliability’ have any meaning? How, more specifically, did Jancis Robinson and her friend know they were sharing an experience unless they had access to certain categories and aesthetic concepts? So, although not an unbridgeable gap, one does need to distinguish appreciation from mere liking, even liking a lot, and a way of doing so is to require more of appreciation than the mere recognition of likeableness or even likeable features. This is the distinction Sackris fails to make. Appreciating a wine is to take part in a community where there are ways of communicating and of being right and wrong. When one tastes one represents one’s community of values, and it is this duty to the community that makes it relevant to make judgments and to be prepared to justify

\textsuperscript{15} Impact for some of those who have it, that is. Only some of those who share such moments go on to pursue objects in the same aesthetic field with gusto. Robinson’s companion did not.

\textsuperscript{16} Sackris, p. 116.
and explain these judgments. We suggest that a minimal requirement for saying that one is appreciating aesthetic properties is that one be able to name these and perhaps even to say something with regard to why it has this property rather than another.

Given this minimal requirement, there is a further question that Sackris’s account raises but does not address: is it or is it not ‘the same experience’ when a subject enjoys X at time T₁ as novice and at time T₂ when as more experienced. At T₁ one cannot even identify it or any of the aesthetic properties that constitute or belong to it, but at T₂ one can both identify aesthetic properties as well as make meaningful comparisons and evaluations with other objects of the same or of different kinds. Sackris’s application of the term ‘appreciation’ to both risks confusing the two, and his argument about the immediacy of the aesthetic experience in fact depends on this confusion.

A distinction, then, but not unbridgeable. We proposed the notion of a ‘proto-aesthetic experience’ to describe such epiphanies in our book *The Aesthetics of Wine*. By this is meant an experience within some new aesthetic domain that (i) most likely has some aesthetically relevant categories in play (it is not absolutely naive) and (ii) relies upon aesthetic concepts borrowed from other aesthetic domains. Unlike any form of just liking something, the proto-aesthetic envisages the possibility of (but in fact currently lacks) the aesthetic conceptual framework generated by an appreciative community devoted to that domain. That is to say, it envisages the possibility of properly aesthetic appreciation, devoted to this new domain, and thus a realm of aesthetic qualities as yet undistinguished and unnamed.

We have shown that Walton’s categories are much more fundamental, and more deeply ingrained, than what is assumed in the account Sackris provides and that the epiphany experience with wine does not necessarily undermine Walton’s account. Moreover, we have pointed out that his equivocation over several senses of ‘appreciation’ may lead to confusion about what is at stake in aesthetic experience. We further hope that our thoughts here may have furthered the discussion about concepts, appreciation and aesthetic experience that Sackris’s article brought up.

---

17 Indeed, some aestheticians go so far as to make a certain ‘know how’ a criterion of aesthetic appreciation. ‘Appreciation starts from an expectation of value, and expectation that paying a work the right sort of attention will be worth one’s while. … The literary innocent mind will not respond at all or will respond in inadequate ways to a literary work’. Stein Haugom Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 154.

18 Burnham and Skilleås, pp. 126–127.