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The Fallacy of Perfect Obviousness in Aesthetic Education

“The fallacy of perfect obviousness” lies in wait for any teacher, once he or she loses sight of the conceptual processes by which are acquired the perceptions that experts in a field exercise “instinctively”. Dr. Schiralli points out that in this respect aesthetic education does not differ from other fields that may seem to be more clearly dependent upon concept formations. Art education too has its groundwork of concept building, which will enable a teacher to develop strategies for helping students to see in a picture the things that strike him or her as perfectly obvious.

This apparently simple proposition has implications for the learner’s grasp of the “basics” in any field. It is rare to find a philosophical treatment that strikes so plainly at the heart of methodology.

I take my title and topic from R. F. Dearden’s chapter on “Learning and Experience” in his *Philosophy of Primary Education*. There is considerably more in this remarkably lucid treatment of conceptual grasp that I would endorse than from which I would wish to dissent.¹ I would like, however, to modify and amplify Dearden’s discussion with regard to his treatment of “the fallacy of perfect obviousness”, namely the supposition that what presents itself to a theoretically sophisticated observer is obvious to all. I would like to show that, contrary to Dearden, this fallacy is as pertinent to education in the arts as it is to science, history, and mathematics education. I shall be using the notion of “theory” as loosely in this paper as Dearden uses it in his discussion. I do not wish to claim that art concepts have the sort of formal systematicity typical of scientific concepts, but rather that they have at least an equal claim to the “softer” theoretical status that Dearden stakes out for concepts in history.

To have a concept, in Dearden’s view, is to have “a principle of unity according to which a number of things may all be regarded as the same, or as being of one kind”.² Such judgements of sameness may pertain to sets of *manifest* properties or relations, in which case the concepts are what Dearden calls “perceptual”. Dearden offers “dog”, “tree”,

“flower”, “red”, “square”, etc. as examples of such concepts. Or the sameness judgement might pertain to the *function* objects have in a form of social life — judgements which enable us to pick out instantiations of “practical” concepts such as “telephone”, “window”, etc. The third and final category of concept Dearden calls “theoretical”. Theoretical concepts reflect the interests of specialized fields of study, and the principles of unity underlying the application of these concepts depend upon networks of relationships among constructs constitutive of theories, disciplines, or forms of understanding.

These concepts, for example “binomial theorem”, “fall of the Western Roman Empire”, “natural selection”, “fossil”, “eclipse”, and so on, unlike those of the first two categories, presuppose initiation into a special form of understanding before they can meaningfully be applied to phenomena. Most of the concepts at work in formal education are of this third sort, and herein lies an important pedagogical problem. Teachers, having already been initiated into their disciplines, often treat instantiations of theoretical concepts as though they were plainly perceptual. Indeed extreme advocates of child-centered, “discovery” learning fallaciously suppose

... that “mathematics and science are all around us”. You have only to open your eyes and there they are. Such a belief exemplifies what Sir Karl Popper has called “the bucket theory of mind”: you have only to open your eyes and the truth will come slopping in, as it were. We might also say that such a belief exemplifies “the fallacy of perfect obviousness”, by supposing that what unavoidably presents itself to a theoretically sophisticated observer is there for all to see.³

The fallacy of perfect obviousness is frequently the cause of pedagogical problems and frustrations. Teachers routinely assume mastery of theoretical concepts in attempting to achieve disciplinary objectives which can only be achieved *using* the very concepts the learner must master *before* he can understand adequately the disciplinary point the teacher is trying to make. How many of us, particularly when we began to teach, carefully staged a lesson so that students could “discover” a given disciplinary point, only to have the students consistently fail to see the point? There is no lack of examples of this fallacy at work. Video tapes of novice or incompetent teachers teaching are a rich source of such misadventures. Although most obviously seen in math or science or history instruction, instances of the fallacy would not appear to obtain in aesthetic or moral education. This should not surprise us, according to Dearden, for: “Aesthetic and moral concepts cannot without strain be regarded as theoretical”.⁴

I will try to show that aesthetic and art concepts, while not collecting themselves into theories quite so tidy as those of the “firmer” disciplines, are nonetheless, and without undue strain, theoretical. That is, that aesthetic concepts gain their significance from conceptual schemata of a specialized sort, that have developed as we have tried to make better sense of a special range of phenomena. The related point I wish to make



Figure 1

is that our lack of awareness of the theoretical status of aesthetic concepts is importantly associated with the failure of most programs of aesthetic education to cultivate very much in the way of widespread and genuine appreciation of the arts. What I am saying, in essence, is that aesthetic educators are among the most active practitioners of the fallacy of perfect obviousness.

First I would like to argue through a number of invented and real cases, that perceiving art is a terribly complex activity. What a person sees when presented with a work of art is not at all obvious, still less “perfectly” so: his perception is dependent upon his grasp of concepts of all sorts, including conceptual schemata specifically involved in aesthetic understanding.

Consider the “object” reproduced in Figure 1. Suppose I were to show this object to a four-year old and ask “What do you see here?” A plausible response to my question might be “I see a lady.” (It must be noted that in this and the examples to follow my claim is *only* that the suggested responses are plausible.) Compare this response to that of a twelve-year old:

Q: What do you see here?

A: I see a picture of a lady.

There is a profound difference in these responses. It is not at all clear in what sense a young child can distinguish between “seeing a lady” and “seeing a picture of a lady”. Indeed if any of our theories about primitive art are at all sound, the distinction between seeing a person (or animal, etc.) and seeing its image is for some people not as facile as it is for us. What the cave painter drew on his wall and thereby subdued *was* his prey. It would be interesting to investigate empirically the stages through which a child develops the capacity for such a distinction, that is, how the concept of “illusion” develops, and in so doing we might develop philosophical insight into the nature of representation. But for our present purposes we need only note that “seeing a lady” and “seeing a picture of a lady” are *conceptually* distinct activities.

Now let us suppose we show the same object to a university student:

Q: What do you see here?

A: I see an old print depicting a lady.

The university student in the course of her general education has probably had the obligatory course or two in the fine arts and has seen prints before. Another way of putting this is that the student has acquired the concept of “print” to some degree of sophistication, hence her seeing

a print is understandable. One might hold that “seeing a print” is very much like “seeing a picture”, but “seeing a print” requires that one *know* what prints are, and so again these activities are conceptually distinct. They are also experientially distinct. One is *aware* of different things when one is seeing a picture and when one is seeing a print.

The university student in other contexts might see a lady (if, for example, we gave her twelve different representations of animals, buildings, and people and asked her what she saw for each) or she might simply see a picture. The options of the university student are wider than those of the twelve-year old.

Let us now question a hypothetical art historian:

Q: What do you see here?

A: I see a portrait of a lady — probably early nineteenth-century Scottish.

Art historians are generally more concerned with style than media, so it would be quite plausible for him to see a *portrait* in a certain *style* first. But he, too, has other options open; when his thinking moves towards considerations of media he may well see a print.

Finally let us show the same object to a doctoral student who has just finished cataloguing the works of Andrew Geddes:

Q: What do you see here?

A: I see a fairly good print of a second-state mezzotint by Andrew Geddes.

The above series of examples barely scratches the surface of what it is possible to see initially when one looks at the Geddes mezzotint. Almost all the concepts referred to were simple concepts of media, but even at this level the parameters of what can be seen are cognitively determined. As one’s conceptual scheme of media increases in complexity and as one’s base of pertinent knowledge increases, possible plausible “seeings” increase. The twelve-year old can *look* at the Geddes mezzotint but cannot *see* the mezzotint until he has the relevant knowledge and concepts.

In the above discussions we have been dealing with an “object” which can plausibly be counted as an instantiation of several distinct concepts. Most aesthetic and art concepts are much more complex than those alluded to in the discussion above and appeal (often implicitly) in their application to special networks of knowledge and understanding. The possibilities of what there is to see in art become more variegated and specialized.



Figure 2

The Rembrandt portrait reproduced in Figure 2 was painted in 1634 and gives the likeness of the painter and his wife. Nineteenth-century scholars tended to see this painting as a joyous celebration of conjugal bliss. Man and wife at home; food, drink, smiles, laughter.

But contemporary art historians have taught us to see the painting differently. The board in the upper left-hand corner has been shown to be a tally-board. Such tablets were used by innkeepers to record the draughts of ale that patrons had imbibed. The naïve eye sees a man and wife at home, but the sophisticated viewer sees the couple in a pub. Man and wife? One did not go to the pub in seventeenth-century Amsterdam with one's wife. The woman? It is, after all, the oldest profession.

Iconographic studies have provided further evidence for the contemporary interpretation. The peacock symbolizes pride. The richly laden table and oversized pilsner glass express gluttony; the plumes on his hat, pride and dissipation. Now is the smile on the man's face one of bliss, or of profligacy?

The point of the painting will dawn more clearly if we consider what art historians reckon to be the true title of the picture. It is not "Portrait of the Artist with his Wife Saskia", as had previously been assumed, but rather "The Prodigal Son".

With this information in mind one sees an allegory depicting the prodigal son within all men (the artist, nicely, included). We no longer see an expression of marital harmony, but an expression of sinful dissipation. Do we see the same thing before and after the acquisition of pertinent knowledge?

Transformations in *what is seen*, as one's education in the arts progresses, abound. When one grasps the symbolic purport of the games that the children are playing in Bruegel's famous painting, one sees it as an allegory, and as with the Rembrandt portrait such seeing is dependent upon the grasp of such interrelated concepts as "symbol", "allegory", and "representation".

In the same way when one learns a bit about the Elizabethan's conception of the world, what one had taken to be a soulful tragedy of unrequited love in *Romeo and Juliet* is suddenly seen as a brilliantly caustic satire on the follies of romantic love. Compare too the changes in one's image of the pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as one learns enough about medieval iconography and Chaucer's commitment to the maxim, *Radix malorum est cupiditas*, to take the Prioress's medallion (inscribed *Amor Vincit Omnia*) as merely a token of good fellowship.

Let us now look more closely at the theoretical vocabulary for seeing in the arts. It is a very rich vocabulary and it is not surprising that it should be so. For, whatever difficulties one might have in explicating a definition for "work of art", surely no one would call X

a work of art if one did not maintain that *X* was sufficiently interesting to perception to warrant careful attention to its appearance. Since works of art are perceptually interesting phenomena we can understand why, during the course of the development of culture, we have developed specialized networks of concepts to pick out perceptually interesting aspects of things. Aestheticians have devised various schemata for systematizing these perceptually interesting aspects of phenomena. Harry S. Broudy's tripartite distinction among sensuous, formal and expressive qualities is among the most exhaustive.⁵

We are probably all aware of the extent to which we take delight in perceiving the sensuous, formal and expressive aspects of things. Whenever we perceive the brightness or vividness of color, pastels, shades, light, the texture of a surface, the impasto quality of oil paint, or the shiny hardness of the new acrylics, we are attending to the sensuous aspects of objects. When confronted with a thickly-brushed oil painting, a sophisticated viewer might not attend to its sensuous aspect at all, initially; indeed other, more dramatic, aspects will probably be perceived. But as the viewer looks at the painting, its sensuous aspect will probably dawn on him eventually — especially if he seeks it out. The contours of the experience of seeing the painting will have changed dramatically, and he will see the painting differently.

One of the more dramatic aspects of the oil painting would be its formal aspect. When one sees a formal aspect of a work of art, one perceives the parts in some relation to each other or to the whole. A third aspect of our oil painting, the expressive, is discerned when we see the painting or some part of it as the image of a feeling or an emotion. In the earlier discussion of the Rembrandt portrait we had a good example of an expressive aspect that changed when new knowledge was acquired. Recall that the smile was first seen as an image of bliss, later as one of incontinence. Expressive aspects of natural objects are often seen, as when we predicate feelings to the sea or sunset: "The sea is calm tonight," or "The sunset is subdued."

The formal, expressive and sensuous aspects are not limited to works of art; non-art objects have these aspects to greater or lesser degrees of interest. The driftwood we take home from the beach often has very interesting formal, expressive and sensuous aspects. Since sensuous, formal and expressive aspects pertain to *all* perceptually interesting objects, I shall call them *aesthetically relevant aspects*. As soon as we begin talking about art, however, a whole range of new aspects — what I shall call *artistically relevant aspects* — begins to emerge. And seeing any of these aspects depends upon prior grasp of the pertinent concept.

Among artistically relevant aspects, I shall distinguish three categories: *media aspects*, *style aspects*, and *intentional aspects*. In the Geddes example most of the aspects that were initially seen by the different viewers were aspects of media. Other media aspects appear on the following incomplete list. Each entry on the list is conceptually dis-

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tinct, some pairs are mutually exclusive, some may share the same referent:

a painting	an engraving
a drawing	a sculpture
a sketch	a silk screen print
a fresco	a lithograph
an etching	a bust
a bas relief	an equestrian statue

Seeing aspects of style is a central activity in the educated viewer's commerce with works of art. Seeing aspects of style is closely related to the following observation of Wittgenstein:

I can contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that the face has not changed; and yet I see it differently.⁶

Replacing "face" with "painting" or "work of art", one has an equally insightful point about the perception of art. Aspects of style include

baroque	linear
romantic	painterly
high renaissance	abstract expressionist
ming	surrealist
impressionist	rococo

The final category of artistically relevant aspects I have called "intentional" aspects. Seeing intentional aspects derives from knowledge of the special purposes for which a particular work of art was created. To look at a work of art and miss an intentional aspect is, in many cases, to miss the *point* of the work. I have argued in the Rembrandt and Shakespeare examples that seeing an allegory or satire is different from seeing a representation. Examples of intentional aspects include satire, allegory, caricature, representation, and agit-prop.

I do not claim that these conceptual schemata exhaust the possibilities of understanding our commerce with art any more than I would wish to suggest that the theories of science exhaust the possibilities of understanding nature. What I have tried to show is that aesthetic and art concepts do have coherence, serve purposes or interests of a specialized sort, and are importantly involved in perceiving and understanding art. As such they clearly deserve the theoretical status that Dearden denies them, *at least* to the extent that Dearden willingly concedes historical concepts.

Earlier in this paper I claimed that failure to recognize the theoretical nature of aesthetic and art concepts was a source of the failure of many programs in aesthetic education. One source of this confusion is that while most teachers of art have, *inter alia*, a highly developed concept

of form, they do not always have the ability explicitly to represent that conceptual grasp verbally. We might, following Polanyi, regard their mastery of "form" as *tacit*, but this is not to say that it is impossible in principle to articulate such tacit knowledge. De Witt Parker's *Analysis of Art*⁷ may be viewed as an attempt to make the cultivated perceiver's "sense" of form articulate and explicit, and as such it is invaluable in helping teachers of the arts to come to *know* that they know as much as many of them do. Parker delimits a sophisticated set of theoretical principles of form: organic unity, theme, thematic variation, balance, hierarchy and evolution. These concepts, which are very difficult to teach to novices in the arts, are, in my experience, grasped almost instantly by people with wide experience in the arts.

Contrast the cases of two teachers of the arts — one able to articulate his sense of form, one unable to do so. Let us suppose that both teachers are capable of comparably sophisticated encounters with a formally compelling canvas and that they are using the painting in a high school course in art appreciation. The second teacher presents the painting to his class with admiration; the students are unimpressed. When the students ask him why the painting is so good, he says that it "works", that it is "beautiful", that it is "moving", etc. The students, many if not most of them, do not know what he is talking about. The teacher falls back on telling anecdotes about the artist's life and the students listen with interest. Later that night the teacher mutters to his wife something on the order of "You can't teach art — either you feel it or you don't."

In being able to articulate the formal qualities of the painting (to himself), our first teacher can frame successful teaching strategies. Using Parker's theoretical principles of form, for instance, the teacher can direct the student's *attention* to specific features of the painting. He might *point* to a visual theme in the work, show how it is *varied* elsewhere, and discuss with the class the extent to which these relationships *unify* the painting.

I have used the concept of "form" and a pair of rather fanciful examples to make a rather serious point: that there is a good deal to learn, some of it requiring hard work and study, before one can perceive a work of art. To alter Dearden on Popper, we ought not to suppose that "art" is all around us, and that all we need do is open our eyes and aesthetic value will come "slopping in". As it were.

NOTES

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1. I would suggest in passing that there might well be tensions between the view of concepts presented in this section and the epistemological presuppositions implicit in Dearden's treatment of the "forms of understanding" earlier in the book. An account which (rightfully) connects concepts with interests (which change) does not jibe well with the epistemological stasis inherent in the "forms".

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2. R.F. Dearden, *The Philosophy of Primary Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 108.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
5. H.S. Broudy, *Enlightened Cherishing: An Essay in Aesthetic Education* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).
6. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 193e.
7. De Witt H. Parker, "The Problem of Esthetic Form" from *The Analysis of Art* (1924) in Melvin Rader, ed., *A Modern Book of Esthetics* (3rd ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), pp. 323-331.