THE VICE OF SNOBBERY: AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE, JUSTIFICATION AND VIRTUE IN ART APPRECIATION

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Abstract

The pre-theoretic intuition that snobbery undermines justification and legitimacy for aesthetic claims is outlined. Furthermore, it is argued that snobbery is pervasive in the aesthetic realm, much more so than we tend to presume, and it is very difficult to tell whether we or other people are judging snobbishly. If these two claims are combined a fundamental problem arises. We do not know whether or not we are justified in believing or making aesthetic claims. Addressing this new challenge requires us to give an epistemological story that underpins when, where and why snobbish judgement is problematic and how appreciative claims can survive. It is argued that doing so leads us toward a virtue theoretic account of art appreciation and aesthetic justification as contrasted with a purely reliabilist one (thereby indicating a new direction for contemporary aesthetics).

Characterising Snobbery

It is important to realise that being a snob is consistent with having true beliefs. It is not internal to the concept of snobbery that judgement must be in error. Snobs can and do get aesthetic judgements right. Nonetheless there is a non-contingent connection between
suspecting someone of being a snob and suspecting that features extrinsic to proper aesthetic appreciation sway their judgement.

Consider a low level case of coffee appreciation. Imagine someone who takes ‘Illy’ as a mark of good coffee. They scour local cafés and only go to places using the brand (whilst refusing to go to Starbucks). This may smack of snobbery but it need not – as long as the object of appreciation is the taste of the coffee. By contrast imagine someone else who behaves identically but whose appreciation of the coffee is driven by social reasons. In this case, unlike the first, it is partly being appreciated just because it is ‘Illy’ coffee. Why do this? They desire to be the kind of person associated with the brand. It helps mark them off, in their own mind or those of others, as being one sort of person rather than another. The phenomenon is the same in more paradigmatic aesthetic cases. Someone may take it that something’s being a popular musical or novel is a mark of its mediocrity as art. Whether or not they are being snobbish depends on how that factors into their appreciation. If someone’s judgement that a work is artistically inferior stems from the recognition that it is popular and the desire to set themselves above the herd, then they are being a snob.

What makes best sense of the above intuitions in a way that distinguishes snobbery from innocent critical appraisal? Snobbery involves appreciation and judgement being driven by reasons that are external to appreciation proper - in particular for the sake of elevating an individual’s status relative to some individual or group. Appreciation proper here is neutral concerning controversies about aesthetic or art appreciation and allows that social and functional considerations may have an appropriate role in informing appreciation (see Davies 2006). All that is required at this stage is the prima
facie plausible negative recognition that social features such as a particular class or
group’s liking something is often irrelevant to its aesthetic value and, where this is so,
appreciative activity issuing in judgement should not be driven by such. What is
problematic about snobs is the fetishisation of responses or judgement in order to enable
them to feel or appear to be superior. Thus a formal characterisation of aesthetic snobbery
can be given in the following terms:

A snobbish judgement or response is one where aesthetically irrelevant social features
play a causal role in the subject’s appreciative activity in coming to judge the value of x
qua aesthetic object such that how they are formed, along with any concomitant
rationalisation, are explained more fundamentally in terms of the subject’s drive to feel or
appear superior in relation to some individual or group.

It is worth highlighting some virtues of the characterisation. It makes sense of
why we associate certain paradigmatic features with snobbery whilst nonetheless
suggesting why many of them are neither unique nor necessarily vicious. We associate
baroque characterisations or obscure allusions with snobbery because they can be used as
a means of asserting superiority. The perniciousness of snobbery does not consist in the
assertion of superiority as such. A critic may be justified in highlighting the superiority of
her aesthetic responses relative to a naïve appreciator. Rather what is corrupting about
aesthetic snobbery is that social considerations infect and distort the aesthetic response,
judgement or claim made. The characterisation captures both the self-aggrandisement
integral to snobbery and, crucially, why we are and should naturally be suspicious of a
snob’s aesthetic claims. A snob’s aesthetic appreciation or judgement is distorted by social considerations that are extraneous to proper aesthetic appreciation.

Snobbery’s fetishisation of responses or judgements as a means to claiming superiority relative to some individual or group explains why we have the pre-theoretic intuition that a snob’s responses, judgements and pronouncements are not to be trusted. We suspect that where people are being snobs then they respond as they do or believe what they do for the wrong reasons. If someone likes Illy coffee or art house films in part just because she wants to see herself as or be seen to be a certain class of person then to the extent that this figures in her aesthetic responses or underwrites her aesthetic judgements she appears to lack internal justification for them. The social reason helps to explain her responses but seems unable to justify them. Furthermore, she hardly seems to be in a legitimate position to make aesthetic claims to the extent that her appreciation fixes on non-aesthetically relevant social features as if they themselves are the appreciable aesthetic features or straightforwardly justify the relevant aesthetic attributions. Snobbery seems to contaminate both appreciation and aesthetic justification.

It is worth drawing out analogies to intuitions elsewhere. Consider prejudiced judgements and responses concerning people and their abilities. Where we suspect racism we think that someone may be judging or acting for the wrong sort of reasons. If someone judges others to be inferior because they are black or immigrants then to the extent that such attitudes drive their judgements and actions we think they lack justification for them. Furthermore, to the extent that someone’s claims are underwritten by racist attitudes we assume they are not in a legitimate position to make them. It is important to realise that the undermining of justification and making legitimate claims
can be tied to positive attitudes as well as negative ones. If someone has an uncritical belief in the good qualities of their partner or children, we naturally look on their claims or the justification of their judgements with the same kind of suspicion. Competitive parents may eulogise the character and abilities of their offspring but where we think their judgements are contaminated by the desire to see their children as ‘the best’ then, to the extent that holds true, we think they lack justification for their claims and are not in a good position to make the claims so loudly trumpeted forth.

The Pervasiveness of Snobbery in the Aesthetic Realm

An important upshot is the difficulty in telling the difference between aesthetic appreciation and snobbery. Whilst proper appreciation is concerned with doing justice to the work, snobbery involves making use of the work for the sake of social demarcation. The aesthetic appreciator has to be able to pick out the relevant aesthetic features, apprehend them in the appropriate ways and bring to bear all sorts of relational considerations. The snob has to call on many of the same capacities to be attuned to which markers set off exactly the ‘right’ social signals. Furthermore to do this well the snob will have to attend to many of the same things and in the same sort of ways that proper aesthetic appreciators do. It is no good trying to be a snob about opera’s superiority to musicals if one cannot talk convincingly about what makes for a good opera and why. Thus aesthetic appreciation and snobbery will overlap significantly in terms of the kinds of things that factor into deliberations, decisions and pronouncements.

This would not be a huge problem if snobbery were rare in aesthetic matters. Unfortunately it is endemic. The art world, broadly construed, is pervaded by snobbery.
Art galleries constantly vie for status, discreetly and sometimes not so discreetly deciding whether someone is ‘the right sort of person’ to sell work by a particular artist to. An acquaintance of mine recently attended an invitation only preview at a prestigious London gallery. Upon requesting a glass of champagne she was asked to produce her invitation before being condescendingly informed that those with mere VIP invitations were only entitled to red or white wine. Champagne was reserved for VVIPs only. One only has to open the review pages of newspapers or music magazines to see that snobbery is far from limited to the visual arts. Literary, theatre, pop music, food, wine, interior design and fashion reviews commonly appeal to judgements of superiority ranging from the wholesale dismissal of some category to talking patronisingly about provincial taste or passé styles. Artistic movements themselves are commonly taken up with snobbery. Take any given self-conscious artistic movement or grouping. It is a standard feature of the coalescence of such groups that they sneer at and deride those things they take themselves to be reacting against. It’s not even as if such snobbery is limited to self-consciously ‘high brow’ arenas. At any given time on some talk show or other the host can allude knowingly to a given pop band and their fans and the resultant effect is a knowing chuckle from the audience – the implication being that we know ‘their’ type and feel superior to them. It’s far from surprising then that much arts coverage and the conversation of the cognoscenti in any aesthetic arena is much taken up with gossip concerning what’s in and what’s not. People are commonly preoccupied with knowing what’s the coming thing, what’s hot or fallen out of favour. Why? So that they can feel or show their superiority by being ‘in the know.’ This occurs along many different axes
such as class and wealth; high and lowbrow; mainstream and alternative; scholastic and popular; new and old.

The explanation is partly given by the fundamental psychological drive in human nature for establishing and maintaining social status and identifications. We are essentially social animals. From an extremely early age and throughout our lives we define ourselves in part through our relations with others. As such in and out group identification as well as intra group hierarchical relations are central to our development and self-conceptions.\(^1\) A primary generative mechanism for realising the drive for social status is the definition of oneself as superior to some individual or group. Indeed as psychological studies suggest this is particularly strong in societies where competition and individual self-expression are seen as centrally important (Sherif 1966; Brown 2000). This helps to explain the drive toward snobbery.

Snobbery can exist in many domains. Indeed, the possibility for snobbery generally opens up wherever it looks as if there is room for deference to experts. Why? Experts warrant deference, so if someone wants deference then they aspire to be or look like an expert in something. If you cannot be an expert or be bothered to try, then in order to get deference one solution is to pretend (by kidding yourself or others). In what follows we will look at why the aesthetic realm may be particularly susceptible to snobbery. This will in turn underwrite the claim that we are in a rockier place with respect to aesthetic claims and justification. Why might the aesthetic realm be so

\(^1\) The importance of social status and identification can be accounted for in various ways from evolutionary psychology (Buss 2000, Ch. 12) to social theory and cognition (Abrams and Hogg 1999).
susceptible to snobbery and why might introspection often prove insufficient to reveal whether or not one is being a snob?

Relationality

Aesthetics depends upon relational knowledge that only the initiated can bring to bear to a much greater extent than morality. A work’s aesthetic properties depend not merely on perceivable non-aesthetic ones but, further, upon which ones are standard, variable and contra-standard with respect to the relevant categories (Walton, 1970). Devoid of relational knowledge there are many representational and expressive properties of works that one would be unable to identify. It is not to be denied that relational knowledge can play an important role in ethical judgement. It is just that understanding and appreciating the ethical character of an action does not usually require drawing on so much historical and comparative knowledge. Indeed, creativity and originality are usually irrelevant in ethics whereas they are central in aesthetics. Aesthetic appreciation requires attention to the distinctive problems artists set themselves and the singular ways in which they impose aesthetic form on subject matter to achieve artistic expression. To judge an ethical action lacking in originality is hardly a criticism whereas to claim an artwork lacks originality is always a criticism. Judgements of creativity and originality can hardly be made without much historical and comparative knowledge within the relevant domain.

The Refinement of Appreciation

Appreciation comes in degrees and its cultivation requires the development to a high degree of a huge range of perceptual and cognitive-affective capacities. Indeed,
appreciation as such is open to ever-greater degrees of refinement and discrimination. This is because what matters aesthetically speaking are the qualitative experiences afforded (as contrasted with morality). Paintings, for example, are dense representations where any differences in the painted surface and how the subject is depicted are in principle open to scrutiny and may make an aesthetic difference. Hence, in principle at least, there may always be something further to notice that may affect our appreciation. Thus good art works tend to repay patient attention and we enjoy returning to them time and time again. Furthermore, works not only draw on our capacity to discriminate amongst elements in our experience but cultivate flexibility of apprehension. Encapsulating a telling metaphor, the use of stylistic devices or structuring a work to prescribe and guide our attention in particular ways often yields surprising or insightful inter-relations between formal, expressive and cognitive aspects of a work. The more refined and flexible an appreciator is, the more she will be able to discern in and be rewarded by a (good) work in ways those relatively less discerning will not. Thus, at least in principle, anyone’s aesthetic judgement should always remain open to the possibility that there are features of a work that have not been discerned and which, if they were, might transform appreciation of it. The nature and degree to which this is so seems much greater than in the ethical case because it is the qualitative experience afforded that matters in art and how it is constituted through the representational, expressive, formal and cognitive features of the work. Hence aesthetic judgement is always open in principle to being trumped by the claim of another to discern something further in the work.

The Role of Pleasure
Relationality and refinement contribute to explaining why the aesthetic is particularly prey to snobbery but it is only when these are combined with the role of pleasure that we can explain why introspection is problematic in identifying snobbery in the first person case. In the aesthetic case it is partly constitutive of an object’s being valuable that appreciation is pleasurable or at least gives rise to pleasure. Where pleasure is taken in engaging with a work, we have defeasible reason to value it and to judge that it is good. Given standard appreciators and conditions broadly speaking defeasibility arises due to two considerations. The first, as articulated above, concerns whether an appreciator is suitably informed and discriminating. The second concerns the identification of the aesthetically relevant features and responding appropriately over time in the activity of appreciation. The trouble is we are not very good at identifying in aesthetic appreciation when, where and why our pleasure is or may be a result of undue bias.

Consider the first person case. Our responses and judgements are often driven by factors that we are wholly unaware of and we know that individuals are extremely bad at identifying the determining influences upon their judgement. We engage in post-hoc rationalisations all the time since we are not even aware of the relevant subconscious processes at work in shaping our responses and judgements. This explains why, for example, commercial companies spend millions on certain kinds of market research and product placement. Studies testing implicit memory in advertising and films have shown that exposure to brand names influence familiarity with and preference for brands without explicit memory or even recognition of the relevant brand (Olson and Fazio, 2001). Given that the sub-conscious priming of implicit evaluative attitudes is a strong predictor
of attitude related behaviour (Fazio and Olson, 2003) it is unsurprising that exposure to brand placements affects implicit behaviour (Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007).

The trouble is that the greater the complexity of the possible perceptual discriminations and appraisals that are potentially available the more susceptible we are to subconscious framing and exposure effects. This is a particular problem in the aesthetic case (as contrasted with morality) since the end goal is appreciation. The internal goal of the practice is to create and appreciate works that yield ever greater and more complex rewards in discrimination and appraisal. Furthermore, due to the particular role that pleasure plays in grounding aesthetic judgements, we are more likely to misidentify evaluations as being appropriately aesthetically grounded. We naturally think that pleasure in appreciation springs from an object’s being aesthetically good.

Brochet’s (2001) wine experiments bring this out nicely. In one experiment a white wine was decanted into two glasses and one of them dyed red. 54 oenology students were invited to give their appraisals of each one. No one spotted the similarity. In another experiment involving 57 subjects a middle of the road Bordeaux was decanted into a fancy grand-cru bottle and a plonk bottle. Subject descriptions and appraisals diverged according to the different bottles. 40 subjects said the wine in the grand-cru bottle was worth drinking but only 12 said the wine from the ordinary bottle was. It was the same wine.

It is not just financial status cues that have subliminal effects. In another experiment Cutting (2006) used commonly and rarely reproduced Impressionist paintings as slide backgrounds whilst teaching an introduction to psychology course. He established independently that students prefer more frequently reproduced images, even
though they could not recall having seen them before, over more rarely reproduced ones. Throughout the course he used more rarely reproduced works as backgrounds at a much higher rate than those commonly reproduced. At the end of term students were asked to rate Impressionist works. Even though students had no reliable recall of whether or not they had seen the works before, they showed a marked preference for works most frequently used over the course. Even without conscious recognition, familiarity produces an increased positive affect.

The identification and appraisal of aesthetic qualities can be cued in ways we are not conscious of and it is easy to conflate pleasure gained from aesthetic appreciation with the pleasures of recognition and status. The trouble is that in the aesthetic case we are particularly prone to being led astray due to the role that pleasure plays in aesthetic judgement. It is a commonplace that the putative pleasure an individual takes in appreciating an artwork gives her reason to value it and underwrites the judgement that it is good art. This would seem to be a desideratum of any adequate account of aesthetic value. This is in marked contrast with morality. Given that doing what is right and good often seems to have no such straightforward relation to pleasure it is hardly a constraint on the adequacy of accounts of morality that pleasure must be construed as a reason to judge that some action is moral.

The difficulties of picking out defeaters in the first person case are compounded in the third person case due to the aesthetic norm concerning first person experience. Pleasure in appreciation is a fundamental ground of aesthetic value. Appreciating a work is a matter of apprehending aesthetically relevant features as realised in and through the work. Hence we naturally think that first hand experience with a work, other things being
equal, yields a stronger epistemic basis from which to make aesthetic pronouncements. This is not to claim that aesthetic judgements can only be made through first hand experience of the work. It is just that due to the nature of aesthetic appreciation it is much harder to challenge the pronouncements of others. Why? The lack of publicly available regulative norms in aesthetics means that it is hard to tell when and where someone’s appreciation is appropriate or driven by snobbery.

In empirical cases, mathematics or philosophy there are regulative norms open to public justification. Multiple biases in favour of technicality, apparent prestige or authority can in principle be exposed through various direct and indirect means such as experimentation, proof, argument and peer review. The means for doing so are far from perfect but they are multiple and reasonably transparent. But this is far less true in the aesthetic realm due to the regulative norm of first person experience. On the one hand it is extremely difficult for anyone to put themselves in the position of an enlightened and discriminating appreciator for more than a couple of kinds of art. Hence we are often in a bad position to challenge via our own experience the pronouncements of another putatively arrived at through their experience. On the other hand the perception and apprehension of aesthetically relevant features in appreciating art works is not the kind of thing that is straightforwardly amenable to confirmation or challenge through argument.

Consider the following contrast. Imagine that Foolish Fred is a high school lad who works hard at learning about mathematics because he thinks it will impress the girls. He engages in mathematical investigations with the ultimate aim of getting girlfriends, but that doesn’t prevent him from acquiring all sorts of mathematical knowledge. Indeed let us assume that it doesn’t prevent him from knowing that he has lots of mathematical
knowledge—even if we find it difficult to distinguish those who are learning mathematics because they love it from those who are learning mathematics for carnal reasons. Almost all of Fred’s mathematical judgments will be guided by the right reasons, the ones guiding those who love mathematics for itself. It is not possible to do mathematics that well and not be guided by the right reasons. The mathematical analogue of the aesthetic snob is the kid who not only says that super-advanced calculus is for losers and group theory is where the deep thinkers are at, but endorses say the Pythagorean theorem merely because he knows the famous proof of it (and not because he or anyone else finds the proof cogent). In such cases there are ways in which snobbery is ineffective at achieving its aim unless guided by the right reasons since it can otherwise easily be shown up. The norm of first person authority in the aesthetic realm means that this is not so with the aesthetic snob. Thus aesthetic pronouncements are much less amenable to public justification and much more epistemically opaque than empirical, mathematical or scientific ones. It is much easier to get away with being a snob in the aesthetic realm.

The multilayered explanation given affords some reason to think that the sceptical challenge arises with greater force in the aesthetic realm as contrasted with the ethical. Nonetheless, it might be thought that the susceptibility of snobbery in the aesthetic case, as contrasted with the moral, has been overplayed. After all, there have been and are moral snobs. Consider someone who does not perform morally bad acts because he considers them ‘lower class’, ‘common’ or ‘vulgar’.\(^2\) Indeed to the extent that we think there are connections between social power and moral judgement (Nietzsche 1998) and/or hold that ethical judgement relies upon complex emotional and relational features

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\(^2\) I owe this point to Berys Gaut.
(Dancy 2004) it might be thought that the ethical is as susceptible to snobbery as the aesthetic realm. Yet the extent to which this is so hardly damages the claim made for the aesthetic realm. All it shows is that there may be reason to think that the argument generalises for similar reasons to the ethical case. It would be a significant result indeed if the argument showed snobbery threatens to undermine justification and knowledge claims in the ethical realm as well as the aesthetic one.

The Challenge

The challenge snobbery poses to aesthetic justification and knowledge claims is fundamental. 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. Furthermore, in the aesthetic realm snobbery is pervasive, much more so than we tend to presume, and, moreover, it is very difficult to tell whether oneself or others are being snobbish. The conjunction of these propositions gives rise to the following claim: we don’t know for any given aesthetic response or judgement either whether or not it is justified or whether or not we can legitimately claim that it is the case.

If this is the epistemic situation we’re in the reasonable course of action seems to be to withdraw aesthetic claims. At best snobbery seems to underwrite agnosticism about justification and claims to know in the aesthetic realm. At worst it might motivate wholesale scepticism about them. We have a new sceptical problem about aesthetic justification and claims. If we are to resist such a state of affairs we need to look for an epistemological story that pins down how justification, and legitimate claims to know, can survive in such a hostile environment.
It is worth making explicit here the assumption that snobbish aesthetic knowledge is possible whereas, by contrast, snobbish aesthetic justification is not. Although the snob believes what she does for the wrong reasons, it is being presumed that believing for the right reasons is only necessary for internalist justification. It is further assumed that we can only legitimately make claims to aesthetic knowledge where we have internalist justification. Hence snobbish aesthetic claims are illegitimate but not thereby false.

It might additionally be thought that believing for the right reasons is necessary for aesthetic knowledge. If this were the case then snobbery would pose a challenge not just with respect to justification and claims to knowledge but to the very possibility of aesthetic knowledge. It is worth pointing out because internalists about knowledge hold to such a claim (Chisholm 1989; Feldman 2005). Here’s one way of formulating the challenge given the assumption that aesthetic knowledge is internal (i.e. entails internalist justification):

(a) $K(\text{If we’re judging snobbishly, then } \neg Kp)$

(b) $\neg K(\text{we’re not judging snobbishly})$

(c) $\neg K(Kp)$ [by closure, a,b]

This doesn’t straightforwardly undermine aesthetic knowledge as such but only knowledge of aesthetic knowledge (which is nonetheless a sceptical result). However it might be thought that even if a KK principle (if one knows that p, then one is in a position to know that one knows that p) does not hold of knowledge in general it
nonetheless holds of at least paradigmatic cases of aesthetic knowledge. Wherever one gets an instance of KK we can move from (c) to (d):

(d) ~Kp

Thus we would get scepticism about aesthetic knowledge.

Nonetheless the fundamental challenge is this. The problem of snobbery in aesthetics forces us to address how we can know when, where and why our aesthetic responses or judgements are justified and the conditions that govern the legitimacy of making aesthetic claims. In order to make some headway in meeting the challenge we will critically examine theoretical elaborations of the premise that snobbery undermines aesthetic justification and claims to know. In doing so we will not only go some way toward suggesting how the epistemic challenge should be met but also motivate a new approach within analytic aesthetics.

The Vice of Snobbery and Virtuous Appreciation

What, most fundamentally, distinguishes the snob from the true appreciator? A true appreciator is motivated to care about their experience with a work for itself. Hence she will approach a work with critical sympathy and ask if she is doing justice to it in her appreciation. Snobs, by contrast, are motivated to appreciate or pronounce on some aesthetic object in so far as it enables them to appear socially superior relative to some individual or group. Snobbery is an appreciative vice.

What is it to conceive of snobbery as an appreciative vice? According to Aristotle “virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because they have a certain quality, but only if the agent acts in a certain state, viz. (1) if he knows what he is doing,
(2) if he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition of character” (Aristotle, 1976: II.4, 1105a28-33). The snob fails to live up to the second condition: he does not value the object of artistic merit ‘for itself’.

Ethical virtue requires the agent to choose the right or good action for the appropriate reasons. For someone to act generously (i.e. exercise the virtue of generosity) she must choose the generous action for the very features that make it the generous thing to do. Appreciative virtue, by analogy, requires the agent to be motivated by the artwork’s features that make it an apt candidate for appreciation. The snob’s appreciation is motivated by other concerns – namely the desire to appear superior - and thus falls short of virtue.

However, falling short of virtue isn’t sufficient to constitute a vice. What explains why snobbery is a vice rather than a mere failing? In ethics the wrong motivation must be combined with someone’s living according to an incorrect view of the good (e.g. ‘satisfy your appetites’ or ‘look after number one’). In appreciation snobbery is vicious because the problematic motivation explains why snobs operate according to a different and incorrect conception of appreciation and how aesthetic judgements should be made. A snob’s appreciation tracks social esteem.

A snob’s distorting motivational component, the desire to appear socially superior, explains the intellectual or deliberative errors that snobbery is prone to. Where aesthetic value and social esteem tend to diverge the snob is prey to processes like confabulation, over generalisation, selective focusing of attention or even genre characterisations against the evidence. A snob about musicals may claim, for example, that though they’ve seen a fair few only a couple turned out to be worth bothering with -
despite the fact that they’ve actually seen and enjoyed many more. Why? They are driven to deceive others or are prone to self-deception because what matters to them most is appearing to be the ‘right’ sort of person. What is wrong with the snob’s appreciation is the way in which it tends to track social markers, say the price an artist’s work sells for or where it’s exhibited, and the ways in which their reasoning in appreciation and appraisal are driven by non-aesthetically relevant social considerations. Hence a snob may rate a contemporary visual artist partly just because Saatchi collects their work or it has been exhibited at an achingly hip gallery in SoHo or Hoxton. Thus the snob’s character traits and dispositions will stand in contrast to those of the true appreciator.

Snobbish judgements arise out of vice rather than virtue since at the most general level the motivation is wrong – the fundamental guiding desire is the desire for social esteem rather than appreciation of the work. This will no doubt be compounded since, given the snob’s fundamental motivation, the virtues germane to appreciation will likely not be exercised appropriately and the snob will be prey to corresponding vices. Hence it isn’t just a matter of having the wrong motivation at the most general level, though that is part of the fundamental explanation, but also how the snob’s skills, abilities and dispositions are manifested in vice ridden ways in appreciation. It might also explain why the snob is likely to possess other appreciative vices. A true appreciator is likely, amongst other things, to possess virtues such as courage, open-mindedness and imaginativeness. A snob, by contrast, may be cowardly, close-minded or formulaic in their appreciation.

Even if many of the generative mechanisms or chains of reasoning involved in producing the judgements of the snob and the true appreciator are the same, the way in which snobbery is a vice explains why snobs will generally tend toward error in a way
the virtuous appreciator does not. For what motivates the snob, and thus governs his processes or reasoning, is whatever most usefully marks out his social standing or aspirations. Thus, in contrast to the virtuous appreciator, the snob’s aesthetic judgements and pronouncements will typically not be justified.

Conceiving of appreciation in virtue theoretic terms makes sense of why we praise the virtuous appreciator and condemn the snob. Proper appreciation is an achievement – it is grounded in the exercise of appreciative virtues. By contrast snobs fail to appreciate a work qua aesthetic object properly because they are badly motivated and evaluate works according to incorrect criteria bound up with social esteem. Thus, in appreciative terms, snobs are to be condemned. Furthermore conceiving of snobbery as a vice yields an account of where, when and why they lack justification. Where someone’s motivation for social esteem corrupts her appreciation, judgement or claims made, she will lack justification. The virtuous appreciator’s judgements and pronouncements will thus be justified in a way that the snob’s will not be.³

Aesthetic Angst About Reliable Snobs

Snobbery infects the appreciation or judgement appropriate to an object qua aesthetic object. Hence it tends to arrive at the wrong judgements or where it arrives at the right ones this is a matter of accident or luck.⁴ Why, it might thus be asked, should we talk in

³ The concern with appreciative virtue and vice here does not presuppose or entail commitment to the strong claim associated with Zagzebski (1996) that knowledge itself is to be defined in terms of virtue.
⁴ Closely related but distinct principles insulating true beliefs from luck as a necessary condition for knowledge have been the subject of debate in the epistemology literature. Sosa (1999) argues for a safety principle according to which a true belief is so insulated if and only if the belief continues to be true in most nearby possible worlds in which the
terms of appreciative virtue and vice? What matters surely depends upon the reliability of processes, faculties or abilities from the general to the art specific level. Motivation as such is irrelevant since all that matters is whether a snob’s appreciation is affected in a way that makes the underlying processes issuing in judgements and pronouncements unreliable. It makes sense to value reliable true belief as an end goal in a way it does not for accidental true beliefs since we can aim at the former but not at the latter. In so far as we aim at reliable true beliefs, we can value in practical terms the realisation or fulfilment of that end (Brady, forthcoming). Hence, conceiving of the difference merely in terms of reliability still allows us to praise an ideal appreciator and condemn the snob.

However, matters are not quite so straightforward. After all, given the right sort of environment, a snob could in principle consistently and non-accidentally track the right aesthetic judgements and come to acquire internal justification. Put in terms of one side of the epistemology debate we might say that a snob possesses knowledge wherever they reliably track true beliefs. Exactly how much knowledge the reliabilist will attribute to the snob will depend upon which version of the principle taken to insulate true belief as a condition of knowledge the reliabilist subscribes to and how one is supposed to determine the relevantly close or very close nearby possible worlds. This is difficult given there will

agent forms her belief about the relevant proposition in the same way as they do so in the actual world. Pritchard (2005) argues that the agent’s true belief must be true not just in most but nearly all of the relevant nearby worlds and more recently (2007) suggests a weaker formulation according to which what matters is only that the belief must be true in all of the very close nearby possible worlds.

Classic sources from the literature in epistemology for this kind of thought include Goldman (1979; 1986; 2002) for reliabilism as an analysis of justification and Dretske (1981) for reliabilism as an analysis of knowledge. More recently Sosa (1991), Plantinga (1993) and Greco (1999) have built upon the central insight of reliabilism by anchoring it to the cognitive faculties of the agent. In the literature this latter variant of reliabilism often goes under the heading of virtue epistemology since it puts the agent centre stage in contrast to other forms of reliabilism.
be a huge number of many possible worlds varying in every conceivable dimension. Lewis (1973; 1986) gives some conditions in respective order of importance (1) avoiding large violations of law (2) maximisation of spatio-temporal area and (3) avoidance of local violations of law (i.e. small miracles) whilst stressing that it’s unimportant for the worlds to agree in particular facts even though they may seem very important to us. Alternatively it might be thought that the determination should be made bearing in mind the intuitive principle that worlds differing in finitely many contingent aspects are close together such that the fewer the differences the closer they are. Nonetheless whichever principle is subscribed to the intuition here is that there is something fundamentally disquieting about someone who reliably tracks the right aesthetic judgements for the wrong reasons. A snob’s appreciative responses and judgements issue from a consistent but incorrect standard of correctness concerning social superiority – one that could be tangentially but reliably connected up to true aesthetic worth.

To illustrate the point consider the world portrayed by the sitcom *Frasier*. Frasier and Niles Crane are incredible snobs. If there is Mongolian throat singing at the concert hall or a Château Margaux wine tasting they obsess about having to be there (and who else will or won’t get in). Now imagine that the cultural milieu of this fictional but recognisable Seattle is such that its prime society movers are incredibly refined connoisseurs. Imagine further that this being so admits of socio-economic explanation. Seattle, say, started to attract a cluster of expert aesthetic appreciators due to comparably low real estate prices and the opportunities open to the artistically inclined. Over the years, as Seattle developed, those who came to gain places in high society tended to have great taste. Now due to their enculturation into the local environment the Crane brothers
reliably track the right aesthetic judgements (or at least are as good at doing so as the best appreciators in Seattle). Let us grant that Mongolian throat singing is, aesthetically speaking, amazing and wine from Château Margaux just is the finest. However though their aesthetic judgements are right, at least some of the reasons that figure in underwriting their judgement are either the wrong sort of reasons or the reasons figure in the wrong sort of ways. They like the singing because it is music from an obscure indigenous culture and the wine in virtue of its originating from a renowned French vineyard. They take these features to be good making features as such (as distinct from prima facie marks of value) because doing so marks them out as particular kinds of people. What explains why these reasons play the wrong roles in their aesthetic appreciation is the desire to see themselves as, and be seen by others to be, part of Seattle’s exclusive high society.

Can the Crane brothers justifiably claim to have aesthetic knowledge? They do non-accidentally and reliably track the right aesthetic judgements, albeit for tangential reasons and thus in the wrong sort of way. If all that is meant by asking the question is do they get aesthetic judgements right and can they acquire justification then the answer is yes.⁶ They can check their own pronouncements against those of the idolised critics in Seattle and over time observe that they consistently converge. Hence they can acquire internal justification for their judgements and can come to be in a legitimate position to claim such knowledge for themselves.

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⁶ If the internalist is right then even a reliable snob who tracks the right aesthetic judgements but for the wrong reasons will not have knowledge. The argument here just grants that reliably, non-accidentally tracking the right aesthetic judgments but for tangential reasons nonetheless constitutes bona fide knowledge in some minimal sense. See Pritchard (2008) for an illuminating account of the contemporary debate.
It might be objected that the fictional world of Frasier is far fetched. Perhaps the scenario of subjects reliably tracking aesthetic facts without aesthetic engagement is not a genuine local possibility for creatures like us and the Crane method of deferring to the cultural big cheeses is not plausibly reliable. Yet the scenario does not presume that the Crane brothers have no aesthetic engagement at all. It is just that a large part of their aesthetic engagement is driven by heuristics that are governed by snobbishness. Deference to the cultural big cheeses ensures they have as much reliability and thus aesthetic knowledge as the best appreciators in Seattle. What they lack is the appropriate aesthetic experience and appreciation that underwrites the relevant judgements. This is no different from some everyday actual cases of appreciative snobbery. Wine drinkers, aspiring coffee drinkers and art world types often track or claim as their own the commendations of others in order to appear socially superior. Moreover they can do so using markers such as rarity, branding or price that are tangentially but reliably linked to appreciative value (at least reliable enough to afford some aesthetic knowledge). Where the desire for social superiority drives appreciation and appreciative pronouncements the snob’s appreciation is askew to the extent that it is driven by such extraneous factors and yet it looks like he can come to possess aesthetic justification and legitimately claim aesthetic knowledge.

The Crane brothers and some everyday snobs possess aesthetic knowledge, can acquire justification and are in a position to make aesthetic claims. Nonetheless we’re still suspicious of them qua aesthetic appreciators. Why? Where they arrive at the appropriate judgements they do so parasitically for the wrong sort of reasons or because the reasons figure in the wrong sort of roles qua aesthetic appreciators. Hence, to the
degree that this is so, though they may indeed possess aesthetic justification there remains something fundamentally wrong with their appreciation.

In narrowly epistemic terms both a reliabilist and a virtue theoretic account look as if they are going to say the same thing about such snobs. There may be nothing to distinguish an ideal appreciator’s judgements and a snob’s narrowly construed in terms of warrant or justification. To the extent that the snob’s responses and judgements are epistemically deficient, it would seem that this can be equally well captured by a virtue centred or reliabilist centred theory. However, if we consider whether the snob or the ideal appreciator responds and appreciates virtuously there is a big difference. The virtue theoretic account already contains an account of how the snob’s judgements are epistemically deficient – where and when they are. Furthermore, where the snob does manage to acquire warrant or justification the reliabilist account remains silent whereas the virtue account captures something important – namely that despite possessing justification there is something fundamentally wrong and blameworthy with the snob’s aesthetic appreciation. A snob’s judgement may be justified but the problematic motivation infects aesthetic appreciation. The virtue theoretic account thus looks preferable on the grounds of completeness and elegance of explanation.

The reliabilist may balk here. After all, she might object, aesthetic reliabilism does not and need not claim to give an account of aesthetic experience and appreciation. Indeed, properly speaking, it may remain entirely silent about such matters. The epistemology of aesthetics is one thing and the point behind the interest in and appreciation of the aesthetic is quite another. Why should we expect a unified account of the epistemological issues and those concerned with aesthetic appreciation?
There are two lines of thought that speak in the virtue theorist’s favour here. First, even in cases where the snob is fairly well modally protected the point is that the degree to which someone is a snob is still epistemically speaking a bad thing. There is a range of values that pertain to knowledge (Sosa 2001) and one of them concerns the relationship between knowledge and how we arrive at it. It is one thing to arrive at knowledge via heteronomous deference to others and it is quite another to discover knowledge autonomously via the appropriate exercise of appreciative discrimination, skill and disposition. The latter is both more epistemically valuable and more of an achievement. At worst there remains something epistemically blameworthy about how the snob arrives at judgement and at best the snob just lacks the praiseworthy autonomous relation to aesthetic knowledge that the virtuous appreciator has. The virtue theoretic account captures exactly how and why this is so whereas the standard reliabilist does not. Second, unlike the reliabilist, the virtue approach speaks to why we should care about aesthetic knowledge. What is the value of aesthetic knowledge? It is surely not just that the relevant judgements are true. After all, truth alone is insufficient to make aesthetic knowledge especially worthwhile. I may gain aesthetic knowledge by memorising the names and dates of artists from entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of Art*. Yet expanding my knowledge in this way is pretty worthless unless there is some connection between such knowledge and how it may inform my appreciation. Imagine a Wall Street trader who memorises lists of vintages, regions, appellations and associated characteristics in order to appear superior in front of his boss. The upshot is that he buys and discourses reliably about the most expensive wines. The trader may have aesthetic knowledge and possess various reliable heuristics for arriving at it but if it does not affect his appreciation he is
missing something fundamental. What is missing is any proper connection between the possession of aesthetic knowledge and the point of it. He does not really know what it feels like to appreciate the wine as possessing the relevant characteristics in appreciation of the experience afforded. It is as if he is an aesthetic psychopath constructing rules for judgement (albeit reliable ones) from the outside.

What matters is why we care about aesthetic knowledge. At least much of the reason we do so is not because we care about verdictive judgements as such but rather because of the ways in which judgements feed back into and (hopefully) deepen proper aesthetic understanding and thus appreciation. We typically want to know what the aesthetically relevant facts are, how they connect up and explain a work’s aesthetic effects in order to facilitate our appreciation. This is why, as the virtue approach suggests and the reliabilist account does not, we should expect some basic connect up between the epistemic and appreciative issues. Thus the virtue account is to be preferred.

There remains, however, a more difficult challenge to the virtue theoretic approach. Let us distinguish a judgement snob from a motivational snob. The former has as a reason for judging an artwork to be good that making particular judgements about it enhances or maintains his social status. The latter judges an artwork to be good only if it is good; all her reasons for her aesthetic judgements about the work refer to genuine aesthetic properties of the work. Indeed a motivation snob may be motivated to attend only to those artworks, attention to which, she believes, will enhance or maintain her social status. The judgement snob may judge that musicals are bad because they are popular: so he can be epistemically condemned for judging on the basis of an

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7 The worry was raised by a number of people but the following articulation of it is due to Berys Gaut.
aesthetically irrelevant reason. By contrast the motivational snob correctly judges operas and that some musicals are or might be better than some operas, it is just that she won’t listen to musicals because of their popularity. The motivational snob makes completely accurate aesthetic judgements for the correct autonomous reasons. Why is the motivational snob not a true appreciator, who also happens to be a snob? Her epistemic position is as good as that of the non-snobbish true appreciator. If she is a true appreciator who, qua snob, is not motivated to attend to a work for itself, then appreciation is not a virtue. Thus virtue theoretic approaches to art are inadequate.

The motivational snob as characterised is neither epistemically problematic nor guilty of appreciative vice. Indeed the motivation to appear superior leads to the appreciative motivation to respond appropriately to the aesthetic features of those (kind of) works she chooses to engage with. If this were not true then the motivational snob would not be making the appropriate aesthetic judgements for the right sort of autonomous reasons. In other words the snobbish motivation gives rise to the motivation to respond appropriately to a work’s aesthetically relevant features. This is just what it is to attend to a work for itself. As long as the motivation to respond appropriately to a work’s aesthetically relevant features is the governing end in the activity of appreciation then the motivational snob is appreciating the work for its own sake i.e. is appreciatively virtuous. What does this show?

Appreciative virtue consists in being motivated in the activity of appreciation to attend to, respond to and issue in judgements in appropriate ways for the right sorts of aesthetic reasons. Furthermore in the activity of appreciation it must come to be the governing motivation if the appreciative activity is to be virtuous. This is compatible with
the motivational spring for engaging in the activity itself being something other than the internal end of appreciative reward, whether it be from a desire to alleviate boredom, improve the mind, pass an exam or indeed appear superior. Appreciative virtue does not require that appreciation be solely for its own sake and no other. Indeed it had better not given that many aesthetically appreciable objects are made for and often require appreciation in relation to practical or functional ends (Davies 2006).

The recognition that this is so enables us to acknowledge the many mixed motives from which appreciative activity may spring and the aesthetic bootstrapping effect they may have whilst nonetheless respecting the crucial role that aesthetically virtuous motivation must play in governing the activity of appreciation if someone is to arrive at the appropriate judgements. Only if the motivational snob is consistently motivated by and pursues aesthetic ends in her appreciative activity will it be the case that she will be in the same epistemic position as the non-snobbish true appreciator. Thus a virtue approach looks the most promising in explaining exactly when, where and why snobbery is problematic i.e. constitutes an appreciative vice.

Fair Frances may be motivated to avoid the work of Damien Hirst in favour of Richard Hamilton’s in order to appear superior. As long as her responses in appreciation are guided by an interest in a work’s aesthetically relevant features the motivation is unproblematic. However, wherever and to the extent that snobbish motivation is disposed to feed through into appreciative activity such that it explains why aesthetically irrelevant social features play a causal role in coming to form the aesthetic judgement arrived at it thereby constitutes an appreciative vice. Flawed Frederick condemns work by Jake and Dinos Chapman as cheap sensationalism. His drive to appear superior to those who go in
for the Brit Art crowd causally explains why his appreciation fixes on the transgressive elements in their work without apprehending the ways in which the work can be sculpturally playful. It also explains why Frederick makes the overly laudatory judgements he does about technically skilled but turgid naturalistic paintings. Frederick is guilty of appreciative snobbery whereas Frances is not.

Does conceiving of appreciation in virtue theoretic terms and specifically treating snobbery as an appreciative vice help answer the fundamental challenge? In so far as we lack knowledge about whether or not we are virtuous in this regard, we lack justification for our responses and judgements and cannot legitimately make aesthetic knowledge claims. However, our position is far from irredeemable. We now have an account of the vice of snobbery that explains why snobbish appreciation is fundamentally different from virtuous appreciation and, as an upshot of this, explains why snobbish responses and judgements lack justification when and where they do. This underwrites the characterisation given of the kind of things we should be looking for with respect to snobbery (which we didn’t have before). We can understand what vices such as snobbery are like, thereby allowing us to detect and correct for them. We can come to know the degree to which we are snobs, in what respects our snobbery contaminates our appreciation, how it undermines justification or the legitimacy of our aesthetic pronouncements and which aspects of our character or habits of mind we should aim to correct. There is hope for us all. Education can rescue appreciation, aesthetic justification and appreciative claims (even though many people lack it).

Conclusion and Implications for Contemporary Aesthetics
The nature of snobbery poses a fundamental challenge to the epistemology of aesthetic justification and discourse. The force of the challenge arises not just from the recognition that snobbery is particularly pervasive in the aesthetic arena but that it is often not obvious, either in the first or the third person case, whether or not we are being snobbish. In attempting to show just how that challenge can be met we have given a story which outlines just why aesthetic snobbery is an appreciative vice, why snobs lack aesthetic justification (where they do) and why we ought to withhold our assent from claims made where we suspect someone of being an appreciative snob. In doing so we have gestured toward an account of appreciation that focuses on the virtues of the true appreciator. The ways in which the desire to feel or appear superior can connect up with and corrupt appreciation explains how and why a snob’s judgements and claims lack justification and legitimacy where they do. It also makes clear why even where the snob tracks appropriate aesthetic judgements they should not be praised for doing so - it is not the right sort of achievement qua aesthetic appreciator. More generally this suggests that, in contrast to contemporary philosophical aesthetics, any proper account of appreciation should aim to put something like character and the appreciative virtues centre stage.8

References


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