Patterns of Attention: “Project” and the Phenomenology of Aesthetic Perception

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Abstract
In this paper we investigate how knowledge and experience influence aesthetic perception. We begin with a discussion of recent evidence from perceptual research in wine tasting that turn out to have significant implications for aesthetic perception. We argue that these results suggest not only that knowledge and experience (what we call “competencies”) are central to determining what is tasted and how, but that this happens because such competencies are an important part of the type of “project” that is undertaken with respect to the object. Our analyses suggest that there must be a distinct aesthetic project for wine tasting, and that this project must include specific competencies. We believe this conclusion holds also for aesthetic experience more generally.

1. Introduction. Knowledge, Experience and Perception

Knowledge of and familiarity with forms, genres and artists – just to mention a few such factors – appears to change our perception of the aesthetic object, and lead to qualitatively enhanced, or certainly different, aesthetic experiences. We think a way to investigate this phenomenon is by way of an investigation of wine tasting – precisely because this is a field in which advance knowledge or familiarity is controversial, and thus “blind” tasting is a commonly employed procedure. We begin by analysing some surprising experimental results in the field of wine tasting. In our interpretation of these experimental results, in the first section of this paper, we argue that the key factor seems to be the kind of task (or “project”) that participants are set, and thus which kinds of knowledge and experience they bring to bear on their task. In the second section we provide a general phenomenological model of wine perception. This too suggests the importance of project, and gives us a powerful way of accounting for the experimental results.
Project can be defined provisionally as “the purpose of interpretation”. However, an actively undertaken purpose entails certain types of competencies, attitudes and practices. Moreover, it suggests that the activity in question involves higher cognition, and is not concerned merely with sensory descriptions or responses. The analysis suggests that there must be a distinctive aesthetic project in wine tasting, one which necessarily involves certain competencies. Ultimately, we suggest that this analysis can be extended to aesthetic perception more generally.

One study (Morrot, Brochet, Dubourdieu 2001) has been the main focus for the discussion about how wines are perceived and described. In the first part of their empirical work they used 54 oenology students in Bordeaux and gave them two local wines, one red and one white, and asked them to make lists of aroma descriptors for them. This led them to the conclusion that visual information, chiefly colour, drove wine descriptions, since the white wine was generally described with terms naming yellow or clear objects, and the red wine with terms naming red or dark objects. The second, and deceptive, part of the experiment was carried out with the same white wine as in the first experiment, but in two versions. One version was the white wine that came out of the bottle, and the other one was the same white wine but artificially coloured red. The respondents were then given their own lists of descriptors from the first part of the experiment in alphabetical order, and asked, for each one of their descriptors, which of the two wines most intensely presented the character of this descriptor. It turned out that the respondents used red-wine descriptors to characterise the white wine coloured red. The results were summarised thus: «Because of the visual information, the tasters discounted the olfactory information». In New Zealand Wendy Parr conducted experiments with 29 wine experts that appear to confirm this conclusion: their descriptions of young barrique fermented chardonnay dyed red were more accurate when served in an opaque glass than when it was served in a clear one.

We decided to test Morrot, Brochet and Dubourdieu’s conclusions through an alternative set-up. In May 2008 we conducted two experiments at Staffordshire University with students and staff as respondents, none of whom were neophytes, and none would describe themselves as experts. Two separate tasks were set. The first task was to determine, using both smell and taste, if the single sample is a red wine or a white wine dyed red. It is important to note here both that this

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1 Interestingly, this contrasts with Hugson and Boakes 2002 who conclude that knowledge of grape varieties is the main ordering principle for wine aromas for wine experts.

2 It should be noted, however, that the respondents in this experiment could both smell and taste the wines.


4 In Parr, White and Heatherbell’s experiment the respondents had to rely on smell alone.

5 To avoid rigging the experiment to suit our expectations, we made sure the red and the white wines were “close” in the sense that they would not stand out as being exceedingly tannic (the reds) or thin and acidic (the whites). The red wines were accordingly Pinot Noirs from Burgundy, and the whites Chardonnay from the same area.
situation was not deceptive, and that the set-up thus invited conflict between several senses: the respondents could see, smell and taste the wines\(^6\). The single sample ruled out any influence from possible slight variations in colour between the dyed and the non-dyed samples. The wines were served at the same temperature (15-17° C), which is higher than one would normally serve the white wine. Respondents' success rate in this first experiment was very high indeed, 37 out of 40 (above 90%).

To make absolutely sure that the dye had not influenced the judgements, we set up the second experiment with no dye at all, but with a proper blind-fold. The blind-fold could itself be distracting, but in this experiment there would at least be no inter-sensory conflict with vision. The task was the same: is this a white wine or a red wine you are smelling and tasting? Again, the number of correct judgements was significantly better than chance, with 17 out of 20 (85%) correct judgements.

These two experiments show, we think, that non-experts do not have significant problems identifying the type of wine involved even when the colour is manipulated or withheld. This does not in itself invalidate the conclusion Morrot, Brochet and Dubourdieu reached about colour being the chief organising principle for wine odours\(^7\) but it does show, we think, that the task set has a major influence on which of the properties of a perceptual object, such as a wine, is noticed and considered significant. Morrot, Brochet and Dubourdieu claimed that «the access to color, or lack thereof, leads to the cognitive construction of two distinct representations of the same object»\(^8\), but we have shown that this is more likely to be the result of the deception than the access to wine colour\(^9\).

Stable categories exist where crude determinations, such as red or white, can still be made based solely on smell, or on texture and taste as well as smell. The colour of the wine does not (as in our experiment with the dye) condition the respondents to judge the wine to be of a particular type. The significance of the task (or “project”) is thus paramount. Visual clues appear to overrule taste or smell clues only if the respondents are deliberately deceived. Our experiments show that critical attention can compensate for any conditioning effect from colour. This attention is the crucial factor. Out of all that at any time is sensed by us, we only focus on a fraction. We do not perceive all we sense, and this is by and large a good thing since it allows us to concentrate. The centre of attention, around which the object perceived crystallises, tends to be those

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\(^6\) The results from these experiments were first published in Norwegian in 2011 (Skilleås 2011). Charles Spence writes «it is at present an open question as to whether people […] would still be “fooled” in the intersensory-conflict situation were they explicitly told that the wines under evaluation might have been colored inappropriately» (Spence 2010a: 127). We believe this open question has now been closed.

\(^7\) Morrot, Brochet, Dubourdieu 2001: 316.

\(^8\) *Idem*: 317

\(^9\) Similar results were obtained by Ballester *et al.* 2009.
features we regard as most relevant because of the task or project in which we are engaged. Here is William James’s famous definition of “attention”:

It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others\(^\text{10}\).

Notice that in this passage there are two contrasting movements. The first is a positive, “taking possession” of – as if the mind reaches out and grasps its chosen object. The second is a negative, “withdrawal from”, an act of excluding that which is not deemed relevant. One of the most widely noticed examples of this is the so-called “cocktail-party effect”. You are in a room with many people talking. The other conversations are just a humming noise at the background since you are attending to the one of which you are a part. But suddenly somebody you were not listening to has just mentioned your name, and after this you can only hear the conversation in which your name came up. We employ “salience filters”\(^\text{11}\) to weed out what is not necessary. This is the negative, “withdrawing” aspect of attention. However, one’s own name is always salient and thus attention-grabbing, and motivates the positive “taking possession of” aspect.

As wine is a vague object – difficult to describe and determine at the best of times – so there is every reason to believe that similar relationships between sensing and perceiving obtain in the aesthetic appreciation of wine. One can only attend to a sub-set of what one senses, and this sub-set is likely to be determined by expectations, knowledge and relevance\(^\text{12}\).

The salience filters function more or less automatically, which is why the various effects discussed above appear surprising to participants. However, something very similar can also be employed as a conscious strategy. The operations effected by salience filters can, in many cases at least, be “duplicated” at higher cognitive levels. This may be one reason why the filters can be compensated for when the assigned task is not a deceptive one. For more experienced wine tasters, their accumulated cultural and practical competencies may have evolved into a set of complex decision trees, of which they are aware, and which they can choose to bring to bear. By “decision tree” we mean a process where certainly highly typical features of the wines tasted are sought out, in order to close in on a result. However, thinking about how judgements happen in this way has limitations. The binary logic of included or excluded elements of odour or taste will make it difficult to represent the qualification “not overtly” in our example above. Such a phrase reflects something like a relation of the fruitiness to the whole.

\(^{10}\) James 1890: 403-404.

\(^{11}\) See Knudsen 2007 for a full discussion of this as well as related concepts.

\(^{12}\) This holds more generally, too. See Gregory 1997 for an excellent discussion of this view.
A related issue is the practice of blind tasting. The idea behind such a practice is that tasters will have prejudices for or against certain producers, regions or whatever, but these prejudices can be eliminated if all information about the provenance of the wine is removed. However, if your only loss from tasting wines blind are your prejudices, the examples we have discussed above cannot be explained. Rather than being obstacles to a true and open-minded appraisal of a wine, knowledge both of a cultural and a practical kind are needed in order to attend to the relevant aspects of the wine in the glass. With regard to blind tasting, we think that its proper place is when assessing a series of tokens of a type of wine for purchase or enlightenment – such as when *The World of Fine Wine* brings three experts together for a “single blind” tasting of a vintage or different renditions of a vineyard. “Single blind” means that only the identities of the producer and the cuvée are withheld when the experts are tasting Napa Valley Cabernet or 2009 Bordeaux, for example, while the experts enter their comments and ratings into a computer without conferring with the others, and without the opportunity to change anything afterwards. This magazine also conducts open tastings where the wine’s identity is known to the tasters beforehand, and they are free to confer during the proceedings, in order for them to be able to “draw on their experience and expertise to discuss the wines in their proper context”14. Both these two kinds of conducting tastings are in keeping with our view that conceptual knowledge and experience are not just sources of prejudices, but that activating the competences helps us to focus on those aspects of the wines that are relevant, and which make them interesting. The same, we argue, holds true for aesthetic attention: it is not “ naïve”, but rather founded upon competencies. What we have learned thus far from wine tasting, though, is doomed to irrelevance unless we can show that wine appreciation can be an aesthetic practice.

2. Wine, Cognition and Philosophy

That wine could be an aesthetic experience, and that such an experience requires certain types of knowledge, are points that have been disputed by philosophers such as Roger Scruton and Kent Bach. Scruton15 makes the following claims. First, “the object of the sense of smell is not the thing that smells», as opposed to «visual experience [that] reaches through the “look” of a thing to the thing that looks». In other words, like sounds, smells are «secondary objects», and thus «the thing is not represented in its smells»16. Below, we will argue using phenomenology that intentionality – the looking through the

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13This is quite different from the meaning of “single blind” in scientific methodology, but it is how the magazine describes the procedure.


16Scruton 2007: 4-5. See also Scruton 1981.
sensations towards the sensed – is a basic feature of conscious acts. However, it is certainly true that the intentional object need not be identified with the physical object. Let us put the question this way: is it more difficult to separate the visual property from the thing than it is for the smell property? Dim light or light with an unusual colour can make me say “it looks green to me”. When composing a photograph of a landscape I might treat it simply as an image and not a thing, applying compositional principles like the rule of thirds. Likewise, there are frequent optical effects such as a glancing reflection or an unexpected refraction that give me opportunity to see a “light effect”, ascribing it neither to the reflective object nor to the object reflected, but to the light image itself as an object. In all these cases, hardly unusual, the “look” has become detached from the thing that has the look. Moreover, it is perfectly normal for me to say “your perfume smells lovely”, or “something in here smells horrible”. In contrast, it tends to be under special circumstances that I speak of the smell separately, as in “I cooked fish in here last night”. In other words, normally we do not think with the detached objectivity of classical empiricists, and our experiences have as their meaning that the smell is assigned to the thing that smells. Wine represents itself to us in its sensory properties.

Using his first result that smell is a “secondary object”, Scruton then argues that certain important types of perception events are impossible for smell. Because of its importance for contemporary aesthetics, he picks smelling as or smelling in. Something can «taste of chocolate or that it can taste like chocolate, but not that I taste it as chocolate». Expressed differently, a wine critic, unlike a critic of poetry or painting, can not meaningfully be said to interpret and, moreover, it follows that «winespeak is in some way ungrounded»\(^{17}\). Apropos a similar topic, Barry C. Smith writes: «I may judge what is in my glass as pretty poor for a champagne, but come to see it as rather good when I realise it’s a Prosecco\(^{18}\). Imagine that we prepared a sample of wine by carefully mixing two wines that were very typical of their underlying grape varieties. Competent tasters would get an ambiguous message, and might well interpret the wine dramatically differently. Like Wittgenstein’s well known use of Jastrow’s duck/rabbit figure\(^{19}\), this wine really is both. Now, it might be argued that we are positing a situation of deception here; also, it might be claimed that this analysis is using “interpretation” in a limited sense\(^{20}\). In other words, that our examples and analyses concerning smell do not constitute cases of perceiving as or perceiving in, but just of proposing different causal explanations for some effect. Thus far, though, we have only shown that it is not entirely obvious that we can rule out perceptual ambiguity and interpretation in smell perception.

\(^{17}\) *Idem*: 7.
\(^{18}\) Smith 2010.
\(^{19}\) Wittgenstein 1958: II, xi.
Cain Todd goes further than this in his analysis of the famous spat between Robinson and Parker concerning Château Pavie 2003. He reads it as a case of two aesthetic communities which do not share precisely the same competencies, especially the same paradigm cases. He concludes that the debate shows that, in wine, there might be «incompatible but equally well-justified – and hence “objective” – judgements»\textsuperscript{21}. It is hard to see how this is not a case of “seeing as” or interpretation, and one that does not suffer from the above weaknesses. Finally, whatever other merits the “different causal explanation” objection may have, it no longer applies in the case of an attribute like “harmony”. We say the wine “is harmonious”, but that is not meant in the same way as saying “has a taste of lychees”. An analytical chemist might be able to point to the presence in the wine of the latter (the particular molecule(s) which have this smell), and thus to the causal explanation, but not the former. Nor is “harmony” any set of such chemically correlated properties. In this we are broadly in agreement with Kevin W. Sweeney’s analysis of what he calls «analytical interpretivism»\textsuperscript{22} and with John W. Bender’s quite bold discussion of wine metaphor\textsuperscript{23}. We talk about this “perceiving as” or “perceiving in” issue in our discussion below, when we are treating attributes like “balance” as intermediate intentional objects.

Scruton’s third argument also fails to convince us. Smells he claims are like sounds, except that smells are not organised or interrelated as sounds are. Smell and taste are non-cognitive senses and for this reason, while the experience of wine is of considerable symbolic and even spiritual significance to us, it is and could not be aesthetic. While sounds can be organised, smells and tastes cannot; similarly, the latter cannot be «arranged along a dimension, as sounds are arranged by pitch»\textsuperscript{24}. The argument is similar to that put forward by Mark W. Rowe (1999). It is as if smells and tastes just come jumbled up, and can only be separately identified. This is false, but showing why will require the phenomenological description undertaken below.

Kent Bach’s challenge to the view that wine appreciation can be an aesthetic practice stems from a similar commitment to the non-cognitive nature of wine experience (Bach 2007 and 2008). Because it is purely sensory, neither knowledge nor any employment of wine language will directly enhance the wine experience, which is thus “naïve” in the sense we suggested above. Bach accepts (i) that there can be cognitive projects vis-à-vis wine, such as comparing, recognising or evaluating against given standards; (ii) that all of these projects require prior knowledge; (iii) that all such projects might themselves be productive of other types of pleasure; and (iv) that in some cases at least such knowledge can guide one towards noticing aspects that might enhance the purely sensible pleasure of

\textsuperscript{21}Todd 2010: 131. See also Todd 2012: 101-102.
\textsuperscript{22}Sweeney 2008: 215.
\textsuperscript{23}Bender 2008: 129.
\textsuperscript{24}Scruton 2007: 5.
wine. With all these careful qualifications of his basic thesis, Bach’s position is more difficult to argue against because it is not at all clear exactly what he is arguing for. In any case, Bach needs to argue that the same sensible pleasure is still possible in the absence of any cognitive input, ceteris paribus. However, we know that a wine taster’s “tastes” – that is, from what types of wine she receives sensory pleasure – change as she accumulates expertise. Moreover, we have shown above that my cognitive beliefs about an experience can change the way it is sensed and even the way that it pleases me. That, after all, is the upshot of all the experiments discussed above. So, Bach’s thesis starts to look empirically unlikely, at best. Most writers that disagree with Bach’s position do so by way of his claims concerning wine language. Keith Lehrer and Adrienne Lehrer (2008) provide ample empirical evidence that wine experts, within the range of their expertise, make productive use of wine language to guide themselves and others\(^{25}\). However, Bach can (and indeed does, as we have seen) agree with this, without it affecting his basic thesis. Bach’s point is that the language one uses in describing a wine at best facilitates, but is not part of, the experience. Given that he accepts that knowledge may guide attention in a way that enhances pleasure (i.e., more generally, enhances the experience), however, that is all we require language to do in order to establish wine appreciation as an aesthetic practice. The view that language should be part of the experience is not at issue from our point of view.

Another telling counter-position to Scruton and Bach is put forward by Tim Crane. Crane’s work is primarily directed to rehearsing and evaluating the arguments that suggest that wine is, or is not, a work of art. However, his conclusion is that we resolve this debate, we can claim for wine «many of the privileges of works of art»\(^{26}\). Specifically (and this is what interests us here), that wine experience demands that we return to it, in pursuit of further «understanding»\(^{27}\). That is to say, Crane implies that the distinctive experience of wine is in part cognitive, in that it sets up a project of inquiry. One may learn more from a wine, he implies, but he does not address the question of whether or not this knowledge may enhance in some non-trivial way one’s experience of this wine as well as others.

3. The phenomenology of “projects”

In order to explore how the type of attention we give wine, or more generally the “project” we are engaged in with it, interacts with our knowledge and experience of wine, we will initially employ a phenomenological description\(^{28}\).

\(^{25}\)This is also supported by Hughson and Boakes 2002.

\(^{26}\)Crane 2007: 153.

\(^{27}\)Idem: 152.

\(^{28}\)As developed by Edmund Husserl. Regarding the concept of “project”, however, we owe more to Martin Heidegger who emphasises the “practical” and “worldly” aspects of intentional directedness.
This section will outline what a phenomenology of wine tasting might look like, show the necessity of the concept of “projects” to that account, and thereby give a more satisfying explanation of the experimental results discussed above. In the context of wine, the project can be any one or several out of a long list: to identify a wine, to describe it, to evaluate it, to take it as typical of this or that, to decide how much to sell it for, to pair it with a dinner menu, to evaluate it aesthetically, to judge its ageing potential, to impress a colleague or seduce a dinner companion with it, or simply to enjoy it in company with bowls of pasta. For simplicity’s sake, let us think in terms of one project at a time, although many real situations involve several overlapping projects.

We want to take from phenomenology the notion of intentional object and its “aspects”. This provides us with a useful model for how “the end we have in mind” bridges between our initial knowledge and expectations and the activities or particular experiences we undergo “on the way” towards that end. The intentional object may be a particular entity in space and time such as when I am seeking to evaluate a bottle of wine, or it may be a type of which the particular object is a token, like when the end I have in mind is to grasp what is typical of wines from a particular region or grape variety. Now, it is a characteristic of objects of the senses that they are encountered through a series of views or aspects. We look “through” the aspects, as it were, to the object itself.

Sartre found a nice way to sum up the notion of the intentional object: «If I love her, I love her because she is lovable». Of course we can analyse love as a subjective affect. However, the point is, it is not experienced in this way, as a mental state. That would be as if we were outside of experience, looking in. Rather, within experience, her loveableness is a property of someone in the world. Now, this object is “ideal” at least in the sense that it is never encountered all at once, but rather in a more or less ordered, and generally continuous, sequence of parts or aspects. The things I notice about her (her smile, her laugh) are not originally neutral, and then later interpreted by me as “lovely”. They are aspects of her as lovable. Similarly, an object in space such as a table, for example, will have sides that I cannot see, but which are intended when I look at it. We don’t normally focus on a particular datum – this view on the table – rather we know that this datum has as its meaning its belonging to the table. “I see a table”. Only in specialised circumstances do I perceive the present aspect on its own, as isolated; and still less to perceive discrete, individual sensory elements such as colours, shapes or sounds. Again, the intentional object may, as in this case,
be identified with a particular object. And this in turn may be an intermediate
object which is the character or style that the table exemplifies, such as “Victo-
rian”. By “intermediate intentional object” we mean an object of consciousness
which a project aims at, but only insofar as it is a way of getting to a broader or
more abstract object. The chair is such an intermediate object for the project of
describing styles of furniture. A particular wine being tasted might be an inter-
mediate object for the project of identifying a “typical” dry German Riesling.

Consider how we perceive a melody. The note now playing has its meaning
for me as part of a melody, and it is the melody\(^{33}\) to which I am listening. It
takes a special act of attention to tear the individual note out of the melody and
focus on it – as a violin teacher might have to do to correct some technical error.
This is particularly obvious if the melody is familiar. But even in the case of an
unfamiliar tune, I am not surprised by the fact that it is a melody. That is, I don’t
tend to think of the note in isolation. Nor, indeed, do I experience a melody
in isolation – it is in all likelihood an intermediate intentional object on the
way to some more “complete” object like the first movement of a sonata. These
general observations are also relevant in relation to wine tasting. The experience
of a wine is of an ideal intentional object adumbrated in an analogous fashion,
with a definite sequence.

For every project there will correspond a type of intentional object: what it is
that is being described, evaluated, identified and so forth. The intended object
may be fairly empty to begin with, in the sense that I know little about it and
have experienced nothing. It is never entirely empty, though. Even if we are blind
tasting a wine, in advance we know that it is a wine we are tasting, and its features
will belong under given headings, such as “colour”, “nose”, “viscosity” and so on.
So, even in that case, the project is able to anticipate – to “leap ahead” of itself
towards its object. As we experience the wine – or learn more about it or as our
project advances towards completion – the intended object is “fulfilled”. That is,
I experience further aspects of it, and thus confirm or confound my expectations.
Thus, at any given point, the intended object is a product of the interaction of
our projects, our existing knowledge of or competencies with certain kinds of
phenomena, and the object already partially fulfilled.

Now, returning to our example of the table, to “experience” the table is to
perceive a certain adumbration as continuous with previous adumbrations, as
I entered and walked across the room. Some elements will be given to me as a
passive subject; they are just there in front of me when I open my eyes. Other
elements may be accessed by particular acts such as looking under or behind the
table. There are, in other words, often interactions between bodily movements,
the adumbration given, and the intentional object. We guide our perception
both cognitively, by the kinds of filtering we discussed above, or physically by
moving our bodies. This guiding is what we might call conscious “attention”

\(^{33}\)Husserl distinguishes in this way between noesis and noema.
or, speaking more broadly, “project”. In wine tasting, likewise, we have some control over the sequence, both by prolonging the inspection of the wine in the glass before taking it into the mouth, by attending to specific qualities in such a way as to bring them “forward” by blocking out other simultaneous qualities, by physical manipulation in the mouth to drive off more aromatic compounds, and of course by repeating the tasting. When attending to wines for aesthetic enjoyment, an informal but still rather inflexible procedure has developed over the years to allow the wines to show themselves to (what is believed to be) their best advantage, opening out for the appreciation of wine the dimensions of space (noticing location in the oral or nasal cavities) as well as time (the development and successive release of the wine, permitting a temporal organisation of elements and permitting us to notice phenomena like attack or length). It is the supposed lack of such dimensions in the perception of wine – or more generally for the senses of smell and taste – that leads some philosophers to argue that wine experience cannot be organised, patterned or worked on imaginatively. Both Rowe and Scruton compare taste and smell objects with music, to the detriment of the former. We have already seen how the phenomenology of a note or melody is analogous to wine tasting. Let us now compare the elements of a wine to the elements of an orchestral piece of music and note that in both cases, from the point of view of the observer, the elements appear at least in part “mixed up”, and that part of the job of appreciation is to disentangle them. It is our culturally acquired competencies that tell us what to look for in this project of disentangling components and relationships. Likewise, there will be practical competencies such as the experientially acquired “know how” to actually carry out this delicate disentangling. However, for many projects it is no less important to hear the various distinguished elements together in appropriate ways – as relationships of harmony for example – and corresponding to these ways there will be competencies. Thus, the project of listening to the music aesthetically requires an activity and a competency that is clearly contrasted to the activities and competencies demanded in the project that occupies the recording engineer at the mixing desk, who to a great extent needs to be listening to a sound-scape, not music.

As we have already said, to each project there will correspond a type of intentional object. However, not all projects, by any means, have the wine in front of me as an object. Not noticing this fact can lead to serious misunderstandings. A descriptive project, such as writing as neutral as possible a set of analytical tasting notes for a wine, has for its intentional object the wine insofar as it exhibits a certain sensory profile. We might even suggest that, strictly speaking, it is not the wine that is the object here, but rather the series of experiences itself, unbundled and laid out in terms of discrete elements. On the other hand, an identifying project intends an object that can be assigned a definite place in the world of

wine, with configurations of tastes, textures and scents that “make sense” in terms of my developed competencies. Its object is not the experience, but nor is it this particular physical wine before me. Rather, its object – what is being tasted – is more likely the whole vintage of a cuvée from a particular producer. This particular bottle of wine is just a “vehicle” through which the vintage is tasted.

An evaluative project can be several things. First, just a report on the particular wine insofar as it is met with the affect of agreeableness or disagreeableness of the wine (“I like it”). This liking may also be normative for others (“this is the best of the bunch”). Second, it may be an evaluation of the perfection of the typicity match (“this is a good example of X”). Third, an aesthetic project is certainly evaluative. However, it is evaluative only insofar as it takes the intentional object to be of that kind that could exhibit aesthetic attributes. The aesthetic project will no doubt have to include within it acts characteristic of other projects, the descriptive and evaluative particularly, but as a whole it is distinct from them. The intentional object in the case of identifying the wine is a quite different one from the intentional object in the project of aesthetically evaluating it. In the latter case, the wine is one that can be harmonious, intense, complex – and a range of other aesthetic attributes. The purely identifying taster and the purely evaluating taster may have the same wine in their glass, but they are tasting different wines (i.e. different intentional objects).

At any point of one’s experience, the elements make sense in so far as they are “on the way to” the intentional object. Those parts will thus have a relation to the intended whole. In tasting, I am not primarily sensing a liquorice smell, or a roundness in the mouth feel, rather I am sensing a wine which is given to me through that smell, this mouth feel, and so forth. This is the insight that many writers have arrived at in saying that, whatever metaphysical difficulties are raised by the notion of secondary properties, the “taste is in the wine” or “the taste says something about the wine”\(^{35}\). Thus, the smell is seldom just a smell, which is to say that it is rarely encountered initially as a discrete noetic term\(^{36}\). Rather, depending upon the project in which I am engaged, it occurs as partially fulfilling an intentional object, meaning that it is sensed as something. For example, it is perceived as suggesting that the wine is from some region/grape; o as being out of balance with respect to some other aspect, or with respect to the whole. The intentional object is always ahead of my perceptions, and is partly constructed on the basis of my developed competencies – including my stock of relevant experiences.

Of course, even after the experience has run its course, I still cannot experience the wine as a whole in the same way I can experience a specific taste or scent. Thus, as we noted above, even where the intentional object is this wine, it has an element of ideality, of always “transcending” so to speak what I am experiencing.

\(^{35}\) The most forceful example is Smith 2007b: 58-59.

\(^{36}\) See discussion of Scruton above.
at the moment. So, as the wine gives or reveals itself, the intentional object is also changing in response. This is especially clear in the case of purely descriptive tasting, where the object is supposed to be nothing but the series of experiences, discrete elements teased apart, and carried to exhaustive completion. Even if I know exactly what the wine is, the intentional object that is *this particular wine* is becoming fulfilled. Moreover, it may contain surprises. For example, it may be corked, have some other bottle variation, or have aged in an unexpected fashion. This in turn would force a change of intentional object or even of project. Thus, the specific quality of the elements I sense depends upon the intentional object, but also the other way around. The intentional object is where I think I am headed; it may not be where the wine leads me.

Similarly, many wine experts and enthusiasts report having had a “conversion experience” with wine. Jancis Robinson, MW writes about a bottle of Chambolle-Musigny Premier Cru *Les Amoureuses* 1959, tasted in 1970, as her “conversion”. «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»\(^{37}\). “Wine conversions” are occasions when one particular tasting reveals the specifically *aesthetic* possibilities of wine, to the availability of a whole different project of tasting that might meaningfully and rewardingly be carried out with respect to wine. These are instances when some set of perceptions not only dramatically affects the intentional object, but even forces a change of project. We should keep in mind, though, that conversions to the aesthetic happen to tasters who are already to some degree experienced, possessing some basic cultural and practical competency with respect to wine or other aesthetic objects. So, while it is true that the conversion experience is in the main forced by the phenomenon, that does not in turn entail that we have to think of the aesthetic phenomenon as simply “in” the wine in the same way as with more straightforwardly sensed properties, such as “liquorice”. Moreover, such conversions are rarely if ever complete, in the sense that the “more and nobler reasons” are only glimpsed, but not fully and articulately revealed. As Robinson writes: «I found it impossible to describe. I doubt we even tried to discuss the wine other than to grunt and drool»\(^{38}\). So, it seems plausible to speak of “proto-aesthetic” experiences: pleasurable revelations of possibilities only vaguely identified or understood. One of the advantages of the phenomenological approach is that it gives us a way of understanding this dynamic cognitive interaction within (or even after) the activity, between the project I am engaged in, what is expected as an intentional object, and what is experienced.

Having explained the phenomenology of projects and intentional objects, we are now in a position to return to the tasting experiments discussed above. In the white wine dyed red experiments, the project is a description of an obviously


\(^{38}\) Ibidem.
red wine, and thus respondents unreflectively employ the cognitive resources of such a project — “resources” here meaning the salience filters that belong to the stable category of its colour. In the non-deceptive versions such as our own, however, the project is to determine colour. Therefore, while the colour perceived is normally the chief organising factor, here it can be discounted by an act of reflective attention. The result of this is that the intentional object is a wine the colour of which must be decided on other criteria. Clearly, the project determines the approach to the object and thus the significance of perceptions thereof. Moreover, we have seen that the project determines whether some elements of the wine are even noticed at all; and at least in some cases the assigned project appears to “manufacture” perceptions. It is also worth adding here that the level of regard we have for expertise has something to do with guided communication and trust. Experiments that involve a situation of deception may in fact be telling us more about the role of trust than anything else.

The project is not just an aim towards a particular intentional object, it must also comprise a set of activities such as decanting, pouring, swirling, smelling, sipping and aerating. Likewise, it will include or assume a set of competencies, such as my conceptual or experiential knowledge of this type of wine, my ability to have and employ stable categories and to communicate with them to others, and so on. Our claim, then, is that the project of aesthetic appreciation is not naïve but requires and presupposes competencies, such as we have already outlined, together with a set of intersubjectively agreed-upon practices, and an intersubjectively meaningful descriptive and evaluative language. My competencies allow me to “leap ahead” with generally greater reliability to an anticipation of the wine as a whole, and thus also to direct attention onto features that are relevant to the project. Where the project is aesthetic, this will likely draw on the accumulated tasting experiences of generations, which I have internalised through my previous wine experiences and my cultural knowledge.

While a competency is something that I, as an individual, have, it is acquired through tastings of wines others have tasted, and have talked or written about, through my proficiency with epistemic instruments such as classifications and “aroma wheels”, and by way of a set of overlapping comparisons with other instances of wines, types, or techniques. Typically, competencies are acquired through tasting with others – physically or virtually by way of various media – at least one of whom is likely to be more competent than you. Tasting with others makes “guided perception” possible. This involves communicating about our sensory and aesthetic observations in such a way as to aide each other to see them, and this is a key form of critical rhetoric in any area of aesthetics. We communicate not to blankly express our preferences, but to influence how others perceive an object in a kind of “triangulation” between me, you and the

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39 See Burnham and Skilleas 2012: Ch. 5.
object. This means that as a competent taster you are in any case a representative of a tradition or a community.

Competencies have various functions: to activate expectations concerning how the object will reveal itself; to enable discoveries or surprises *vis-à-vis* expectations about a wine’s elements; to lead us to new intentional objects and new expectations; to prescribe, more or less rigorously, certain procedures by which tasting might have intersubjective validity. Competencies, then, allow for top-down salience filters to be appropriately active. However, they also mean that it becomes possible to give attention to an object such that bottom-up cognition is not over-determining. For example, my competency means that I can over-rule any natural determination effects from the colour or temperature of the wine, such as those outlined above. Clearly, what we have been calling competencies, considered as an essential aspect of projects, are vital to an adequate understanding of situated perceptions and interpretations.

4. *The Aesthetic Project*

The need for competencies is still more clearly the case with regard to aesthetic experience. An aesthetic project is required, together with the activities and competencies that underpin it as a practice, because aesthetic attributes are not straightforwardly *sensed*. That is, they are not perceived as elements common to a range of projects, including especially the descriptive and analytical. “Harmony”, “intensity”, “transparency”, “finesse” or “complexity” are not individual sensations, nor sets of sensations, nor could they be correlated to or entailed by any chemical analysis of the wine. Such attributes involve, at the very least, *relations among* sensations. Harmony *is seen in* the various sensations, which in turn are then “part of” or “contributing to” a harmony that belongs to this wine. That is, aesthetic attributes are intermediate intentional objects, encountered with a positive evaluation (or a corresponding negative evaluation). As we have seen, intentional objects correspond to projects. Only within an aesthetic project, either one consciously adopted or “forced” by the phenomenon, could aesthetic attributes emerge. This is why there must be a distinctive aesthetic project and a distinctive aesthetic competence. The attribute “harmonious” is no more a possible attribute of the intentional object of a purely analytical tasting, than “regret” is a possible attribute of a mathematics paper.

Let us compare the aesthetic project to the more loosely defined project of drinking a wine for sensory pleasure; for example, having an inexpensive glass of wine while at the family dinner table having a bowl of pasta. Assuming I pay attention to the wine at all – rather than to the overall experience – the intentional object here is the wine insofar as I (as an individual subject) do, or do not, happen to like it. I’m not even looking for aesthetic attributes. If I do like it, or if it nicely complements a meal, then that’s all well and good. If I do not like it, it is not a great loss (provided it did not cost too much!). However, as a
taster with an aesthetic project, because of the normativity exhibited by aesthetic judgements, and because of its dependence upon intersubjectively held cultural norms and practices, I am not tasting this wine “alone”, but rather I serve as a competent representative of a community. I feel myself under a constraint or burden of responsibility formed by the collective previous judgements of my peers and ultimately by the aesthetic norms of the cultural group whose representative I am. The aesthetically unsuccessful wine is a disappointment, not just to me but, in effect, to the whole wine appreciating community. The hope for an aesthetic experience has faded away. Previous judgements concerning this producer or vintage might even be called into question. There is a certain risk in undertaking an aesthetic project – one is so often disappointed. The wine that is judged aesthetically successful, on the other hand, is a precious gain for the others. And for me it is a privilege to be my aesthetic community’s representative here, when a fine and aesthetically successful wine is revealing itself.

I expect others to agree with me, ceteris paribus. The normative force of aesthetic judgements thus demands that we distinguish between aesthetic judgement and personal preference. When there is disagreement, we can debate the reasons for it – something that is pointless if the issue is a matter of personal preferences. Through this debate, we may perhaps even be guided towards a change of judgement. This might occur if originally we failed to notice something important, or if the reasons for our first judgement are found wanting because they were not aesthetically relevant. This “guided perception”, which involves communicating about our aesthetic observations in such a way as to aide each other to see them, is a key form of critical rhetoric in any area of aesthetics. We communicate not to blankly express our preferences, but to influence how others perceive an object. In distinguishing various types of competency, each of which is developed intersubjectively and at least indirectly through language, we have also thereby distinguished several types of influence through critical rhetoric. First, corresponding to cultural competency, persuading someone to perceive the object in its cultural context, according to type, style, period and so forth. Second, corresponding to practical competency, helping someone to notice and distinguish elements or otherwise to put the cultural context to work in perception. Third, corresponding to aesthetic competency, persuading someone of a certain manner of constructing and evaluating meaningful, aesthetic relationships and wholes.

Notice that in the discussion above of aesthetic evaluations being normative, we still tended to think from the point of view of the taster, and work outwards to others who, subsequently, are expected to understand and respect the judgement, and to agree (provided, again, all other things are equal). The same “working outwards” is characteristic of classic treatments of the “aesthetic attitude”. However, working in the other direction should be no less valid. When forming aesthetic judgements, I experience myself as being under a constraint,
or as bearing a responsibility: others who have judged will be expecting my agreement. This feeling of being watched may be literally true if I am a junior member of a wine-appreciation group, say. The constraint is no less real, though, if I am the first to taste a new vintage, or if I am the senior member. As aesthetically competent, it is impossible for me to be the first person to have used the aesthetic term “harmonious”, and thus I take on the inter-subjective conditions of the valid use of this term. In the aesthetic project I am not “here” tasting on my own, but rather as a representative of nested series of communities of tasters and ultimately of my aesthetic culture.

Our discussion of aesthetic attributes may appear to be moving towards an account of the aesthetics of wine that is essentially formalist in character. Formalist aesthetics tends to think of aesthetic objects as defined primarily by internal formal structures or relationships. For example, we might think of the notion of “harmony” in an abstract painting simply in terms of the distribution of masses of colour across the canvas; likewise the “complexity” of a piece of music is understood in terms of the diachronic relations among sequences of notes and the synchronic relations of chords. However, in formalism the form is thought to be simply there in the painting or the music, separately from my judgement of it. Likewise, the aesthetic object considered as form is often seen as being cut off from the traditions of art or aesthetics, from any historical or political contexts (e.g. religious practices or political engagement) and also from any cultural expectations that the viewer, listener or taster might bring with them. Above we argue that aesthetic attributes depend upon the object as experienced, but also upon capacities and competencies, and on the shared cultural knowledge of an aesthetic community. Form, then, is not simply there. Rather, aesthetic attributes emerge from the experience of the object by a subject who brings with her knowledge, know-how and experience. We suggest that formalism – and, more generally, the concept of “form” in aesthetics – carries a visual or aural prejudice. Since these senses “act” at a distance, and deal with objects that are understood to be more publicly available, visual and aural objects seem to have a greater independence from the judging subject – in other words, a greater objectivity. Consequently, we argue, aesthetics tends to think of all aesthetic attributes in such a manner; or, indeed, thinks of qualities that lack such independence as incapable of aesthetic form. In other words, aesthetics has backed itself into a corner where it finds it difficult to entertain the possibility that objects of the proximal senses could exhibit aesthetic form. This visual or aural prejudice needs to be questioned, and clearly the investigation of wine appreciation will do just that.

We have seen that attention is a key to understanding how knowledge and experience guide the perception of aesthetic objects, and that our notion of “project” clarifies how the purposes of engaging with the object guides both which of the elements of the object that are given attention, and how previous experiences and knowledge are activated in constructing the perceived object. We used the example of wine tasting throughout, and that required also that we defend the possibil-
ity of an aesthetic project with respect to wine. The phenomenological description of various projects then showed these projects at work. The possibility – or even necessity – of critical rhetoric in the appreciation of wine shows that while the experience of wine is subjective in the sense that the sensations it engenders necessarily are those of a singular subject, the competencies necessary for forming aesthetic judgements with regard to wines are developed and employed inter-subjectively. We think we have given good reasons for the view that there is a distinct aesthetic project – for wine, and by extension for other aesthetic domains.
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