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Teaching The Philosophy of Art in Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter makes a case for elementary-school children having the ability to discuss difficult, abstract philosophical issues. The question of whether judgments of artistic merit are objective or simply an expression of one's preferences is used as an example of an issue in the philosophy of art that young children can discuss. To make the abstract discussion easier to enter into, a children's picture book functions as the vehicle to raise it. In this case, Peter Catalanato's book, *Emily's Art*, raises the question about the objectivity of judgments of artistic merit. In the book, a judge clearly makes a mistake when she rejects Emily's painting because it is a painting of a dog and she hates dogs. We ask the children what the difference is between saying one painting is better than another and saying that you like one flavor of ice cream better than another. Without introducing the names of either great philosophers or labels for philosophical problems, we are able to get young children to engage in deep philosophical discussions and even propose innovative solutions to the problems they discuss.

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Intruduction

The central topic explored by the Philosophy of Art is, as the name suggests, art. But when philosophers use the word *art*, unlike what you may be thinking, they are not singling out one art form—e.g., painting—from all the rest. They use this term to refer to all the various art forms, including painting, sculpture, dance, theatre, literature, and, more recently, film. So, the philosophy of art is an all-encompassing field that discusses issues relating to all the various art forms.

For many years, I have taught the philosophy of art at the college level. But I have also included the philosophy of art as a topic that my college students teach to elementary school children as part of a course, I have been offering for more than a decade. In that course, my undergraduate students teach philosophy to elementary school pupils using picture books as prompts.

In this chapter, I will focus on one central question in the philosophy of art, namely, whether artistic evaluations—such as "This painting is great!"—have a validity that transcends the preferences of the person making the judgment. I do so to demonstrate that elementary school children are not only capable of discussing the philosophy of art but also have interesting and, indeed, sophisticated things to say about it.

The Philosophy of Art

Let me begin with a discussion of the philosophy of art and the question of the validity of artistic evaluations. First, a clarification. Traditionally, the field of philosophy that dealt with issues in art was called *aesthetics*. The term comes from the Greek word, *aisthetikos*, which means sensory or perceptual. Because art is often taken to involve our perceptual response to various stimuli, the term came to be used to refer to the study of art.[1]

The problem with this usage is that it includes evaluations of many things besides art, for we respond with feelings, generally positive and negative, to a much wider range of objects than art works alone. A sunset, a mountain range, even a tiny fish are objects that we can view with positive emotions. To distinguish the philosophical field that deals with art works, some philosophers prefer to talk of the philosophy of art. There is still a philosophical field of aesthetics, but its scope is not limited to questions about art.

Philosophers have raised many problems about art. Among them are: What makes something a work of art? How are our emotions engaged by works of art? What role does art play in society?[2]

[1] The use of the term "aesthetics" in this manner can be traced back to Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Judgment*. But Kant still also used the term in its older meaning to refer to sensible representations, as in the *Critique of Pure Reason.*

[2] My anthology, *The Nature of Art*, assembles a range of different responses that philosophers have given to the question of what makes something a work of art.

Here, I will concentrate on a different question that arises about our judgments regarding works of art. When we judge a work of art to be great or beautiful, we do so based on our response to that work. In this respect, what I shall call *artistic evaluations* are grounded in our subjective responses to the works in question. If I say that Vermeer's painting, *The Art of Painting*, is a better painting than Thomas Kinkade's *the Spirit of Christmas*, for my judgment to be justified I must have seen both of the paintings and my reaction to them must ground my judgment.

In this respect, artistic evaluations are similar to what I shall call *sensory evaluations*. I'm an ice cream fan, and my favorite flavor is chocolate; my least favorite, strawberry. When I say, "I like chocolate ice cream better than strawberry," I am expressing a preference based on my sensory experience of tasting both chocolate and strawberry ice cream.

But that's where the similarity to artistic judgment ends. Artistic evaluations make a claim to a type of objectivity that sensory evaluations do not. If you tell me that you disagree with my judgment about the merit of the Vermeer and Kinkade paintings, I might tell you that I think you are mistaken and try to show you why the Vermeer is better than the Kinkade. But if you were to say that you disagree with me about strawberry and chocolate ice cream, I would probably just say, "Okay, that's interesting. Our tastes differ." The point is that differences in our preferences regarding ice cream are not things we would argue about. We just have different tastes or preferences regarding ice cream flavors and there is no more to say about it.

This raises the question: What justifies the objectivity of artistic evaluations? From the point of view of the philosophy of art, this is where the discussion gets interesting. Various theories have been proposed and there is still ongoing discussion about their validity.

I won't enter into an elaborate discussion of what these different theories are but will instead point to one feature that makes artistic evaluations objective. Something that contributes to the justification of my judgment that *The Art of Painting* is a better painting than *The Spirit of Christmas* is its *originality*. Vermeer's painting involves a representation of light and a structured composition that are among his innovations. These are features that Kinkade's work lacks.

It is important to note that originality is not a feature of an artwork that can be discerned simply by perceiving it. When I say that *The Art of Painting* is an example of Vermeer's originality, I cannot justify that painting without referring to the previous history of painting in the West. Nonetheless, with knowledge of that history, I can justify the claim only by experiencing the work.

College Level Philosophy of Art

When I teach the philosophy of art at the college level, I address the issue of the objectivity of artistic evaluations. This is an issue that the students often have different opinions about and it makes for a lively discussion topic. When we discuss this issue, however, I do not focus on

what the students think. Instead, I want them to understand the different solutions to this puzzling question that have been proposed by philosophers.

For example, I expect them to learn the difference between Hume and Kant's views on the question of the objectivity of judgments of artistic merit. Both these great philosophers agreed that judgments that express an artistic evaluation make a claim to objectivity, but they disagreed about why. Baldly put, Hume grounded the objectivity of such judgments in the views of experts whose taste was, as he put it, "refined," while Kant grounded it in the fact that all human beings shared the same perceptual structure.

I don't want to get into the fine points of the disagreement between Hume and Kant, only to highlight the fact that a crucial aspect of my college teaching involves getting students to appreciate and understand the views of great philosophers. The texts that they read are not easy, and we spend a great deal of time learning how to discern the views that these texts contain. This is an important skill that students at the college level need to learn. In teaching the philosophy of art, I want the students to develop an ability to read, understand, and critique the views of previous philosophers.

Elementary School Philosophy of Art

Given what I've just said, you might be wondering how I teach philosophy of art to second graders. Do I present them with caricatures of the great philosophers, so that they learn the basic difference between Hume and Kant's view? If not, what do I do?[1]

Never do we mention the name of a great philosopher to elementary school philosophy pupils. Our goal is not to give them a simplified lesson in the history of philosophy on any topic. Rather, we seek to have the children discuss important philosophical issues on their own using the basic techniques that are characteristic of philosophy. Rather than learning about philosophy, we help them to be actively engaged in doing philosophy.

To begin, we give the children a set of simple, almost obvious rules for having a philosophy discussion. When I have taught elementary children myself, I often actually develop such rules by means of a discussion with the students, so that they view the rules as ones they have developed and agreed to on their own. When my college students are doing the teaching, I have chosen to present the rules to the children for a number of reasons. First, we have only a limited number of sessions with the children and I want to devote them to discussing a range of different philosophical issues. My own college class runs for 13 weeks and half of that is spent getting the college students up to speed on conducting an elementary school philosophy discussion, so that we only spend about 7 weeks in the school. Also, my students are all novices at facilitating philosophy discussions and I believe it's easier for them to have a text in hand to focus their

[1] More general accounts of what my course is like can be found on my website, http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/course

energies on, rather than just embarking on a discussion of how one should conduct a philosophy discussion.

So, I have my students present the children with a set of guidelines for having a philosophy discussion. Here is one version of the rules that I developed together with Ali Bassiri, who has been developing a program for philosophy for children in San Jose, California:

GUIDELINES FOR DOING PHILOSOPHY
- Decide what you think
- Identify the right words to say it
- Argue using reason and facts
- Listen to criticism
- Observe the problems with your view
- Generate a revised idea

As you might have noticed, these rules generate the mnemonic DIALOG, which is an easy way for the children to remember them. It's just one version. You can find others elsewhere. (See, for example, Wartenberg, 2009)

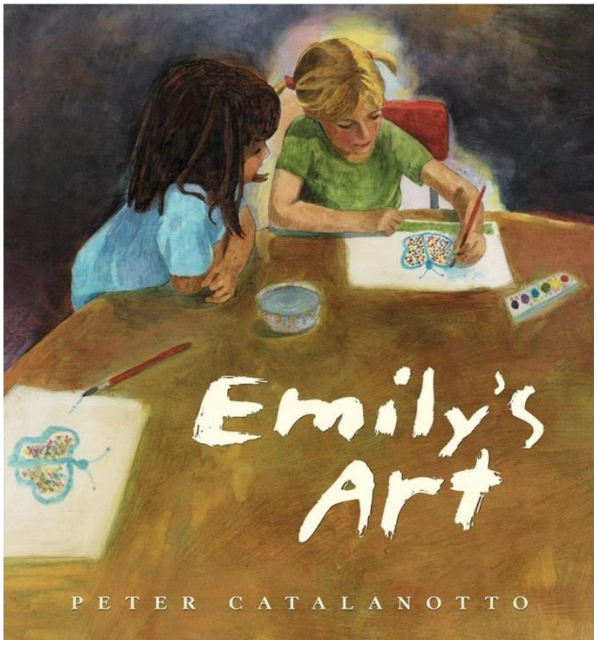
Once we have presented these guidelines, do we simply ask children whether they think that artistic evaluations are objective or not? Obviously not. Not only would the children have trouble understanding what the question asks, but they might also have trouble discussing such an abstract issue. In order to give them a handle on what is at stake, we need to begin with a more concrete question.

This concreteness is provided by children's picture books. We always initiate a philosophy for children discussion by reading the children a picture book. Although I began using picture books because teachers were required to teach them, I have come to see that they are excellent ways to initiate children's philosophy discussions. Children love to be read books. Beginning a session with a "read-aloud" creates interest and excitement that gets transferred to the actual philosophy discussion.[1]

After the read-aloud, the philosophy discussion begins. Often, we create a chart that puts the narrative of the book in visual form so that the children can refer to it during the discussion. Then, my college student facilitator asks the children a question. Almost without exception, hands shoot up and the discussion takes off.

The book that we read to the children to initiate a discussion of the issue about artistic evaluations is Peter Catalanotto's *Emily's Art*, a delightful book that has illustrations that can themselves generate stimulating discussions about art.

[1] There is also evidence that children will be better and more committed readers if they are read to. For many of the children we teach, being read to is a relatively unusual experience. They come away from our course with a new or renewed affection for picture books.



The book focuses on an art contest that takes place in Ms. Fair's first grade class. Emily is the best artist in the class and the painting she enters is of her dog Thor, whom she paints with huge ears to signify how good his hearing is. The judge initially awards Emily's painting first prize but changes her mind when she learns that it is not, as she had thought, a painting of a rabbit. She now finds Emily's painting distasteful, for she dislikes dogs after having been bitten by one. She then gives the prize to a painting of a butterfly—she just *loves* butterflies, she says by way of explanation—drawn by Emily's best friend, Kelly.

When this story is read to the children, they react with outrage at the judge's decision. "It's not fair," they say. And that's when we ask them to talk about why they think Emily's painting is good, thereby initiating our philosophical discussion of artistic evaluation. Although we pose the question, it takes off from the children's very real outrage over the judge's decision.

At first, they cite some of the reasons that the judge gave for initially choosing Emily's painting: its detail and color. But they go on to expand on their reaction with a variety of different comments about the painting: that parts of it are very realistic; that it's very good for a first grader; etc. This stage of the discussion helps cement their sense that Emily has produced a painting that ought to win the prize.

But now we throw them a curve ball of sorts. We ask them to think whether they prefer chocolate or vanilla ice cream. We go around the class and see what each of them has to say. Predictably, there is usually a difference of opinion. If there isn't, the facilitator can enter into the discussion by disagreeing with the children's position.

Once they have discussed that question, we ask them whether they think that their opinion is the right one and that their friends are wrong. Usually, they all agree that there is no right or wrong when it comes to the taste of different flavors of ice cream.

So now we pose the real dilemma: We ask them to say whether they think that choosing Kelly's painting over Emily's is the same as saying that you prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla, or not. Couldn't the judge just have a different preference than they do about which painting is better, preferring a painting of a creature she likes over one of a creature she despises? Or is there a reason why one opinion about Emily's painting is the right one?

When Susan Fink's fifth grade class discussed this question in the fall of 2003, here is how the disagreement emerged.[1] A very articulate fifth grader, Jack, asserted that there was no difference between the artistic evaluation and the expression of taste preferences. "The two cases are just the same," he said, thereby denying that what the judge did was unfair or wrong.

Inez disagreed. They presented an argument to show that Jack's position was untenable. "Say that the judge like castles. Then everyone would say, 'He's coming,' and paint pictures of castles." Inez's point was that if we allowed people to judge the merit of works of art on the basis of their preferences for the objects depicted, the whole idea of a contest—and, with it, artistic evaluation—would not make sense.

This is a very sophisticated argument. It involves the form of proof known as *reductio ad absurdum*. To justify a claim—here, that judgments of artistic merit should not be based on the attitudes we have towards the objects that artworks depict—you assume the opposite: that such attitudes should be used as the basis for artistic evaluation. You then show that this leads to an absurd conclusion, which Inez does by arguing that this would make art contests meaningless since everyone would try to paint objects that the judge likes. That a fifth grader could come up with such an argument in response to their classmate's claims indicates that fifth graders are truly capable of doing philosophy.

But the discussion did not end there. My college student facilitator then asked Inez what a judge should use to decide which painting deserves a prize. Here, Inez went back to what the judge had originally said about Emily's painting, that it possessed certain features that made it good, specifically, color and detail.

Had there been more time, I hope that my student would have pressed the fifth graders on whether the presence of color and detail always made a painting good. But we ran out of time and went on to a new discussion during the next session. Nonetheless, the fifth graders had an excellent discussion of a very difficult issue in the philosophy of art, a discussion that involved many important philosophical aspects.

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[1] What follows is my summary and loose transcription of the discussion captured on Albrecht and Wartenberg. A short excerpt that captures the conflict I describe can be viewed at http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Video

Conclusion

My aim has been to show that elementary school children can have insightful discussions of philosophical issues. The philosophy of art, which I have been talking about in this chapter, is an excellent topic to discuss with young children. One reason why the subject of art and artistic evaluations is pertinent to elementary school children is that they spend a lot of time creating paintings and other art works. Looking at and evaluating their own artworks is therefore part of their experience and that makes them have a stake in figuring out what they believe.

Before leaving this topic, let me just mention that my own college students have the opportunity to discuss questions in much the same way that the elementary school children do. Earlier, I emphasized the importance of college students learning to read and criticize philosophical texts. I would only add that when I teach them, I try to balance that aspect of philosophy with a more hands-on experience, such as the one the elementary school children experience. Teaching philosophy in elementary schools has affected how I teach college students!

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