Ceteris Paribus Hedges in Critical Principles

Do general principles play a role in the critical evaluation of artworks? If so, what sort of role do they play and what sort of principles are they? I argue that principles are involved in aesthetic judgment and that they must be appealed to especially in cases when critics deliberate and determine the consistency between their verdicts on individual artworks. Following Frank Sibley, we can take principles as identifying properties with inherently positive or negative polarities that can be reversed in interactions with other properties.\(^1\) I contend that we should understand the character of such principles as having *ceteris paribus* hedges that restrict the scopes of the principles to artworks in which the inherent polarities of cited qualities are not undermined or reversed. That is, I endorse Michael Strevens’s “narrowing” approach to interpreting *ceteris paribus* clauses.\(^2\)

The conditions of application of critical principles—when certain polarities are not undermined or reversed—may be partly opaque and unknown. This is where the narrowing approach shows a clear advantage over a “softening” approach, like that used by John Bender. Unpacking the opaque truth conditions of such principles, which is possible under the narrowing understanding of *ceteris paribus* hedges, helps to clarify how critics go about working out the consistency between their verdicts. This view of critical principles is consistent with and even predicts Arnold Isenberg’s particularist intuition that verdicts can be directly perceived without the need to infer them from principles.\(^3\) After all, opaque truth conditions mean that sometimes critics may not know whether an inference from a principle to verdict is valid. Ultimately, this view of hedged principles helps to make sense of critical aesthetic practice and accords with both the generalist intuition that critical reasons, to be reasons, require principles and the particularist intuition that inferences to verdicts can be short-circuited by direct acts of perception.

I. PARTICULARISM AND GENERALISM

Very roughly, particularists think that principles do not play a role in evaluations of art whereas generalists think they do. However, positions differ as to what exact *role* principles do or do not play in aesthetic evaluation as well as what *character* such principles have.\(^4\) Regarding the role of principles, there is the question as to whether principles are appealed to as a matter of *actual* critical practice, or whether they *need* to or *should* be appealed to when making aesthetic judgments.\(^5\) The character of principles is normally understood as linking qualities of artworks in some sort of general way to aesthetic value or disvalue.

Some generalists, such as Monroe Beardsley or Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar, think that the character of principles is such that they identify qualities that always and everywhere count as either a merit or demerit in artworks.\(^6\) Such a position is open to the particularist charge that there is in fact no quality that counts as a merit in one work but does not count as a defect elsewhere. In response to this particularist reply, other generalists have defended principles of a more defeasible sort. Frank Sibley, for instance, thinks that Beardsley’s form of generalism is unnecessarily “heroic” and that general reasons can cite inherently positive or negative properties that nonetheless may have their polarities reversed when they interact with other properties. So for example, Sibley takes comedy to be an inherent merit, but when the comic elements of a work detract from its predominant tragic intensity, then its comic elements actually become a demerit.\(^7\) George Dickie has offered explicit formulations of general principles of the Sibleyan kind such as “Unity in a work of art (in isolation from the other properties of the work) is always
valuable,” or “Unity in a work of art, if it does not interact negatively with any other property or combination of properties of the work, is always valuable.”

That critics cite properties of artworks as reasons for their verdicts is something neither the particularist nor the generalist denies. The chief foundation, I take it, underlying the generalist position is that reasons must be general to count as reasons and that such generality is inevitably dependent on principles. However, the particularist denies precisely that reasons depend on principles and places the burden of proof on the generalist to show that principles are indeed involved or relevant to aesthetic evaluation. Rather than respond to every particularist worry, the strategy I take here will be to explain in greater detail the character that Sibleyan and Dickiean type principles may take and the role they play in aesthetic evaluation. The goal is to show that there is independent reason to think that such principles plausibly make sense of critical practice and are even consistent with certain particularist intuitions. It is of course possible that other principles with different characters (such as Beardsley’s one-way-always principles) may also play various roles in aesthetic criticism. For the purposes of this paper though, I will remain agnostic on this point.

II. THE CHARACTER OF DEFEASIBLE CRITICAL PRINCIPLES

One way to think of Sibleyan and Dickiean principles that identify inherent yet defeasible qualities is as having ceteris paribus hedges that restrict the scope of principles to those artworks in which the inherent qualities mentioned do not have their polarities undermined or reversed. Consider the following principle: *Ceteris paribus, elegance makes artworks so much the better.* Here elegance is taken to have an inherently positive polarity. The function of the ceteris paribus hedge is to rule out cases in which elegance interacts negatively with other properties such that its positive valence is undermined or reversed. The ceteris paribus hedge, in other words, ensures that the prima facie merit of elegance is an actual merit in the artworks in which the principle holds.

This invocation and interpretation of ceteris paribus clauses aligns with what Michael Strevens calls a “narrowing” approach—one that strengthens a generalization (such as elegant artworks are good) by reducing the range of its application. This stands in contrast to a “softening” approach that works to loosen the connection asserted by a generalization, such as that between elegance and artistic value. Under a softening approach, *Ceteris paribus, elegance makes artworks so much the better* may be taken to mean *Elegance has the tendency to make artworks good.* John Bender, for instance, adopts just such a strategy for understanding defeasible critical principles. Without fully discussing the merits of softening proposals, one worry to flag at the outset is that at best, such tendency principles give us only inductive support for thinking a work having some quality will be valuable or not. However, critical discourse traffics not in whether some quality is likely to make a work good or not but whether some quality in a particular artwork is in fact a merit or demerit. Defeasible critical principles understood under a narrowing approach can serve this purpose when applied to artworks.

One consequence of interpreting hedged principles according to a narrowing approach is that the conditions of their application are typically opaque or not fully known to their users. Critics will ordinarily be unable to specify explicitly or completely the general conditions in which the inherent polarity of some quality is not undermined or reversed. The truth conditions of evaluative principles may be a highly convoluted matter and their exact and complete specification may be extremely complex, even infinite. It may, perhaps, be impossible for aesthetic principles to be formulated without some conditions of application remaining opaque.

Nonetheless, the opaque truth conditions of a principle brought about by a ceteris paribus hedge can grow in transparency as the content of the principle becomes better understood. Ceteris paribus hedges, in other words, can become progressively unpacked. Sibley can be seen to be doing precisely this for the principle *Ceteris paribus, comic elements make artworks so much the better* when he suggests that inherently valuable comic elements will have their polarity reversed when they dilute the otherwise predominant tragic intensity of a work. Sibley’s observation unpacks one kind of condition in which the
inherent value of comedy is reversed even as other truth conditions of the principle might still be opaque to us and thus remain within the bounds of the *ceteris paribus* hedge.

By contrast, principles under a softening account do not attempt to progressively unpack the exact conditions under which properties are merits or demerits. Since such principles seek only to identify tendencies, and the tendencies *themselves* apply universally. Their conditions of application are thus not opaque even if it is unclear in which cases these tendencies actually come into fruition. In other words, under a softening account, elegance *always* has the tendency to make artworks good, though one might not know exactly when artworks that are elegant are in fact better for it.

One possible worry regarding *ceteris paribus* hedges is that they may be ad hoc and so trivialize the generalizations they modify. The concern is that *Ceteris paribus, elegance makes artworks so much the better* means something like *Elegance makes artworks so much the better, except when it does not.* However, under the narrowing account I explain here, *ceteris paribus* hedges are not ad hoc in this way. While hedges do protect principles from some counterexamples, they do not prevent the principle from potentially being disconfirmed. If an elegant artwork is made worse by its elegance but this owes to the reversal or undermining of its elegance’s inherently positive polarity, then indeed, such a case would not count against the principle and is ruled out by the *ceteris paribus* hedge. On the other hand, if the elegance of an artwork does not interact negatively with any other property (perhaps because elegance is the only value property of the work), and yet the artwork is made worse for its elegance, then this would be a clear counterexample to the principle. It would show that elegance had a negative, rather than a positive, polarity in this work. The principle would also fail to be true if elegance was inherently neutral and had no positive or negative polarity. Under these cases, the entire principle would have to be rejected or revised and the *ceteris paribus* hedge would not be able to salvage it in any ad hoc manner.  

III. THE ROLE OF DEFEASIBLE CRITICAL PRINCIPLES

The chief reason for understanding the character of critical principles as having *ceteris paribus* hedges with opaque truth conditions is that doing so is helpful for understanding the role that such principles play in aesthetic evaluation. Unpacking the hedges of critical principles helps to make sense of what is going on when critics deliberate on and determine the consistency between their evaluative judgments of particular artworks. To see this, it will be useful to consider James Shelley’s portrayal of the critical process below:

\[
S_1: W_1 \text{ is good. (verdict or judgment)} \\
S_2: \text{Why? What makes it so? (reason-request)} \\
S_1: \text{Because } W_1 \text{ has } Q_1. \text{ (reason)} \\
S_2: \text{But } W_2 \text{ also has } Q_1 \text{ and is not made better for having it. (consistency-challenge)} \\
S_1: (1) \text{Yes, but } W_1 \text{ also has } Q_2, \text{ which } W_2 \text{ lacks. (refinement)} \\
\text{[or]} \\
(2) \text{Yes, but } W_2 \text{ also has } Q_2, \text{ which } W_1 \text{ lacks. (refinement)}^{22}
\]

Thus, Shelley divides the critical process into three stages: “(1) the verdict; (2) the reason-stage, in which a reason is requested and given; and (3) the consistency-stage, in which the reason is apparently challenged on the grounds that it is inconsistent with other reasons that have been or ought to be given, and in which a refinement of the reason is offered in response.”\(^{23}\) The consistency-stage can be repeated numerous times with successive consistency challenges and corresponding refinements.

Like Shelley, I take it that something like these three stages goes on in critical practice. Unlike Shelley, I think that critics are appealing to principles when they are responding to consistency challenges and refining their reasons. Why does \(S_2\) bringing up \(W_2\) (which has \(Q_1\) but is not made better for it) challenge \(S_1\)’s verdict that \(W_1\) is good because it has \(Q_1\)? It must be because \(S_2\) takes herself to be pointing
out a counterexample to the principle that always makes artworks so much the better. And when \( S_1 \)
responds by observing that \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \) differ in some other quality \( Q_2 \), \( S_1 \) must be showing that the
generality of her reason for \( W_1 \)’s goodness was captured all along by a hedged principle such as \( \text{Ceteris paribus} \), \( Q_1 \) makes artworks so much the better. By observing that \( W_1 \) and \( W_2 \) differ in the possession of \( Q_2 \), \( S_1 \) is unpacking part of the opaque truth conditions in the \( \text{ceteris paribus} \) hedge to show that one of the
conditions needed for \( Q_1 \) to make a work better is either the possession or lack of \( Q_2 \). In other words, \( S_1 \) is suggesting that there was a rider to her principle all along that excluded \( W_2 \) as a counterexample. Either \( Q_2 \) is an enabling condition for \( Q_1 \) to make works better, or \( Q_2 \) undermines or reverses the positive polarity of \( Q_1 \).

Notice that by unpacking part of the opaque truth conditions of the principle \( \text{Ceteris paribus} \), \( Q_1 \) makes artworks so much the better, \( S_1 \) is not demonstrating that her reason for \( W_1 \)’s goodness is consistent with all other reasons that have been or should be given. Instead, \( S_1 \) is just demonstrating that her reason is not inconsistent with the reason brought up by \( S_2 \)’s consistency challenge.\(^{24}\) This explains why the consistency-stage can be repeated numerous times because there may be other conditions that enable \( Q_1 \) to make works good or other conditions that reverse \( Q_1 \)’s polarity that are, as of now, still opaque.

Next we might consider whether or not \( S_1 \) in refining her reason is offering a new reason or referring to the same reason she initially gave. It may well be the case that \( S_1 \) takes \( S_2 \)’s consistency challenge as demonstrating that \( Q_1 \) alone is insufficient to account for \( W_1 \)’s value. \( S_1 \) may think, for instance, that what makes \( W_1 \) good is not the positive polarity of \( Q_1 \) but rather the inherent value of an interaction between \( Q_1 \) and \( Q_2 \). Sibley mentions an example of this kind of case “where hints of melancholy interposed within the gaiety, as in a Mozart movement, do not diminish or weaken the predominant gaiety, but unite to give the work a different and itself valuable character, for example, the quintessence of a gaiety tinged with an underlying melancholy.”\(^{25}\) So \( S_1 \) may take \( S_2 \)’s consistency challenge of \( W_2 \) having \( Q_1 \) but not being made better for it as falling within the restricted scope of \( S_1 \)’s principle even after its \( \text{ceteris paribus} \) hedge is taken into account. Hence, appealing to principles and articulating the contents of the generalities at issue will clarify what \( S_1 \)’s reason refinement consists in—whether \( S_1 \) is offering a new reason or referring to the same one she initially gave. It is of course possible that in response to numerous consistency challenges, \( S_1 \) continuously gives new reasons, in which case \( S_1 \) will be giving increasingly better approximations of what is making the various artworks under examination good or bad.

The appeal to hedged general principles thus helps to make sense of the consistency-stage in three ways. First, it explains what the consistency of reasons consists in because principles articulate the generalities of reasons and demonstrate what \( S_2 \) and \( S_1 \) are disagreeing about when one issues a consistency challenge and the other responds to it. Second, it explains why the consistency-stage can be repeated numerous times, since each cycle through the consistency-stage only unpacks some of the opaque truth conditions for a principle. Lastly, the appeal to principles explains when \( S_1 \)’s refinement of her reason is offering a new reason or referring to the same reason.

Shelley himself takes a compatibilist stance between particularism and generalism. For Shelley, while principles exist, critics only appeal to general reasons and not to principles when they make judgments about art. Since the generality of a reason just is the generality articulated by a principle, the appeal to general reasons is evidence that principles exist.\(^{26}\) However, one cannot infer that there is appeal to principles in criticism from the fact of their existence. “You can appeal only to that to which you have cognitive access, and you can have cognitive access to a reason that is general without having cognitive access to the principle that articulates that generality” presumably because of the principle’s extreme complexity.\(^{27}\) By appealing to a general reason, you are committed to the principle that picks out that generality even though you may not and need not be able to articulate that principle.\(^{28}\)

Here Shelley appears to expect too much from our grasp of principles. Just because we may not have cognitive access to the full content of critical principles does not mean we do not have cognitive access to them at all. Indeed, this is the whole point of \( \text{ceteris paribus} \) hedges: to help us articulate and appeal to principles whose generalities and truth conditions are partly opaque to us. Shelley seems to be
ignoring this crucial possibility for the character of critical principles. Perhaps there is not so much distance between Shelley’s position and my own since we both think the generalities of principles may not be fully specifiable. However, for Shelley, the appeal to principles is an all-or-nothing ordeal and without cognitive access to their entire content, principles cannot be employed in criticism—only general reasons can undergo progressive refinement. I, on the other hand, do not see how the refinement of general reasons can take place without increasingly better understanding of their generalities—which is to say increasingly better grasp of the principles that articulate those generalities. And the unpacking of once opaque truth conditions of hedged principles precisely helps to make sense of how our cognitive access to the content of principles and our work to achieve consistency between our critical judgments can be a matter of degree. Additionally, admitting this less demanding view of access to partly opaque principles is more of a piece with principles employed in other domains, such as science. Our usual epistemic position with respect to generalizations appears to be such that we have partial but not full knowledge of their conditions of application.29 This, however, does not necessarily prevent us from appealing to them in our reasoning.

We may also consider Arnold Isenberg’s classic particularist argument, which Shelley likewise employs to show that principles need not be appealed to in criticism. For Isenberg and Shelley, a reason given for a verdict on a work “functions not as a premise but as a guide to perception of the work that allows the truth of the verdict to be grasped non-inferentially.”30 So when a critic offers a reason for a verdict (that \( W_i \) has \( Q_1 \)), she does not count on her audience to tacitly appeal to a principle that the quality \( Q_1 \) makes works good and then infer from the principle and the fact that \( W_i \) has \( Q_1 \) that \( W_i \) is good.31 Seeing that a work is elegant, for instance, just is to see that the work is good if in this case elegance is a kind of goodness.32 That is, there is nothing to be gained by appealing to a principle since the inference to a verdict can be short-circuited by a direct act of perception.

However, this Isenbergian intuition is consistent with and even predicted by the character and role of defeasible critical principles. Even if it is true that inference from principles is not needed to make evaluative judgments about art, this doesn’t mean that principles cannot play an explanatory role in which they are cited after a judgment has been made in order to explain the generality of the determinants behind that judgment. Sibley himself seems to have held something close to this view for he says, “there are no sure-fire mechanical rules or procedures for deciding which qualities are actual defects in the work; one has to judge for oneself. But if the critic does decide that the comic elements are defects in this work, a perfectly general reason can be given.”33 For any individual evaluative judgment, principles can but need not be appealed to since one may just perceive non-inferentially the value of a property in a particular artwork without knowing the full general conditions under which that property contributes value in all artworks. Principles logically mediate between qualities and artistic value even if, temporally, we are able to make verdicts about artworks without the use of such principles,34 and before we can articulate those principles. Such a view, as Dickie notes, “like Hume’s, is a ‘bottom-up’ one in which principles are derived for our experiences of value in artworks.”35 In fact, the character of critical principles as hedged with partly opaque truth conditions predicts that sometimes critics will not be able to infer verdicts from principles because they may not know for some artworks whether the conditions hold for the inherent polarities of qualities not to be undermined or reversed.

However, when it comes to working out the consistency between particular evaluative judgments, we must appeal to principles in order to articulate (even if not fully) the content of the generalities that underlie those consistencies. Verdicts and judgments about the consistency of verdicts are logically distinct from one another. That one can grasp verdicts non-inferentially does not mean that one can grasp judgments non-inferentially about the consistency between verdicts. And when you can articulate the generality of a principle that explains multiple judgments and their consistency with one another, you will also understand the determinants of each individual judgment more fully. This explains why you may want to cite principles to explain a particular verdict even if you do not need to appeal to such principles when initially making that verdict. For example, perhaps you can grasp non-inferentially that comedy in \( W_1 \) makes \( W_1 \) good and comedy in \( W_2 \) makes the \( W_2 \) bad. When you are able to articulate a principle that explains the consistency behind the two judgments (for example, that one of the conditions in which
comedy’s inherent polarity is reversed is when it dilutes a work’s predominant tragic intensity and that this condition holds in \( W_2 \), then you will understand more fully why comedy makes \( W_2 \) bad but \( W_1 \) good. As Daniel Kaufman notes too, unpacking the scope of a principle to better understand the consistency across various verdicts may also be a matter of understanding the artistic kind (grouped according to common formal and narrative purposes) to which the principle applies. For instance, not all artworks that display Christ’s humanity are better for it, just artworks that belong to a certain kind whose artistic purpose is geared toward conveying the Christian humanist message (such as many in the late Middle Ages, both Renaissances, and the Mannerist and Baroque periods).\(^3\)

It may be the case that the better the critic, the less she relies on principles in making her judgments about particular artworks. In other words, better critics may be better at the Isenbergian skill of non-inferentially perceiving the value of artworks. However, it may also be the case that the better the critic, the better she will be at citing principles that articulate the generalities underlying the consistency between her judgments. The better critics will be able to explain the general conditions under which aesthetic qualities are undermined or reversed. They will have a clearer understanding of the determinants of their verdicts. These are then two skills that it seems good critics should excel at: one that does not necessarily involve the appeal to principles and the other that requires it. The view I present of the character and role of hedged critical principles thus ultimately helps to capture both the generalist intuition that reasons employed in criticism are general and rely on principles and the particularist intuition that sometimes one can just see the value of an artwork.

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Endnotes


5 This distinction corresponds with one Kirwin makes between two particularist positions (\( P_1 \) and \( P_3 \)). See Claire Kirwin, “Why Sibley Is (Probably) Not a Particularist After All,” The British Journal of Aesthetics 51, no. 2 (2011): 203–4, doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayr005.

7 Sibley, “General Criteria and Reasons,” 105–7. An anonymous reviewer has questioned whether there is a relation between critical principles and the doctrine of medium specificity, such that one may be tied to or dependent on another, especially when it comes to the sort of examples that Sibley suggests. First exegetically, I don’t find that Sibley’s example of comedy diluting tragic intensity is tied to medium specificity since many different sorts of media can aim to be comic or tragic. Second, while I don’t think generalism about critical principles depends on the doctrine of medium specificity, it may very well be that medium specificity depends on generalism. Even if artworks need not exploit the distinctive features of their respective medium to be better as art, there may still be principles that apply to artworks no matter their media. However, endorsing the doctrine of medium specificity seems to require the defense of principles of some sort linking the success of artworks with the characteristic features of their media.


9 It is also possible to deny that critics cite any reasons or properties in their evaluations of artworks. However, the consideration of this position is beyond the scope of my paper, which only covers the debate between the particularist and generalist. See Conolly and Haydar, though, for a rejection of this stance, which they call illusionism. “Aesthetic Principles,” 115–8.

10 Ibid., 115; Sibley, “General Criteria and Reasons,” 104.


12 Strevens, “Ceteris Paribus Hedges,” 660.

13 Ibid., 659.


15 To be fair to Bender, he recognizes this issue and addresses it. Ibid., 387.

16 Strevens, “*Ceteris Paribus* Hedges,” 655.

17 Cf. ibid., 653.

18 Cf. ibid., 675.

19 Ibid., 662–3.


Ibid.

Ibid., 131.

Sibley, “General Criteria and Reasons,” 118.


Ibid., 129.

Ibid., 136.

See Streven, “Ceteris Paribus Hedges.”


Ibid., 132.

Sibley, “General Criteria and Reasons,” 107–8; Dickie agrees that principles play an explanatory role, see “James Shelley on Critical Principles,” 61; Kirwin gives a helpful gloss on Sibley's rejection of “sure-fire mechanical rules” as a rejection of “algorithmic decision-procedures.” She takes it that aesthetic evaluation can be rule-governed even if it requires some sort of good judgment or “taste” and even if no algorithms can be used. See “Not a Particularist,” 205–6.


Daniel A. Kaufman, “Critical Justification and Critical Laws,” The British Journal of Aesthetics 43, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 398, doi:10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.4.393. An anonymous reviewer has suggested that genre conventions and criteria may also serve to delimit the scope of critical principles that are appealed to as a matter of actual practice. This seems very much in line with Kaufman’s point about artistic kinds, which he thinks can be made consistent with the classification systems that art historians employ. I agree that this is likely a fruitful path to take when flushing out the character of critical principles in more detail. Further consideration, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.