

## Chapter 9

### CRITICAL COMPATIBILISM

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1. What is the distinction between particularism and generalism in aesthetics? I hope to convince you that the answer to this question is harder to come by than we have thought. Particularism, whatever it is, is thought to have received its classic articulation in Arnold Isenberg's 1949 essay, "Critical Communication." Generalism, whatever it is, is thought to have received its classic articulation in Frank Sibley's 1983 essay, "General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics" (2001c). So if we wish to understand what particularism and generalism are, these are the essays to which we should turn.

2. Isenberg offers definitions of neither particularism nor generalism; nor does he refer to his position as 'particularist.' (Sibley seems to have been the first to apply the terms 'particularist' and 'generalist' to theories of criticism.) The theory of criticism he develops in his essay, however, he develops in contrast to another, which he describes as "widely held in spite of its deficiencies," and which he characterizes as dividing the critical process into three parts: "There is the value judgment or *verdict* (V): 'This picture or poem is good –.' There is a particular statement or *reason* (R): '– because it has such-and-such quality –.' And there is a general statement or *norm* (N): '– and any work which has that quality is *pro tanto* good'" (1949: 330). The point of contrast between the "widely held" theory and Isenberg's, according to which we may now aptly refer to the former as 'generalist' and the latter as 'particularist,' concerns N. According to the former theory, reason R functions as a premise (or something very like a premise) from which verdict V may be inferred (or something very like inferred). But since V does not follow from R simply, the widely held theory

must posit a tacit appeal to a general principle, N, which links the quality specified in R with the value specified in V. According to Isenberg's theory, R functions not as a premise for V but as a guide to a perception of the work that allows for the value specified in V to be grasped directly. Since on this view it is an act of perception that mediates R and V, as opposed to an inference (or something very like one), there is simply no role for N to play.

So if there are definitions of particularism and generalism to be derived from Isenberg's essay, they take something like following forms:

Particularism is the view that in criticism no appeal is made to general principles.

Generalism is the view that in criticism appeal is made to general principles.

3. Sibley, by contrast, offers a fairly explicit definition of particularism and, by extension, of generalism:

Throughout his writings Beardsley has steadily fought to uphold the view that in criticism there are and can be general reasons for aesthetic judgments. On this point I stand and have always stood on the same side as he does. Thus, basically, we face together those many writers over several decades – I dub them 'particularists' – who have argued that in criticism there are no such general reasons (2001c: 104).

We may say, then, that Sibley defines particularism and generalism as follows:

Particularism is the view that there are no general reasons in criticism.

Generalism is the view that there are general reasons in criticism.

But these definitions tell us little unless we know what it is for a reason to be general, and on this point Sibley says only that general reasons "must have a consistency about them" (2001c: 104). This in turn tells us little unless we have some idea what it is for a reason to have a consistency about it, and on this point Sibley says nothing. Our only recourse is to consult the text for examples of the sort of thing he has in mind. I find three such examples. The first is the strong form of consistency adopted by Beardsley, according to which a reason is general only if the quality it specifies counts in one direction, as either merit or defect, in every circumstance. But Sibley worries that to opt for such a strong form of consistency is to play into the particularist's hand, since there is no quality that is a merit in one work that