

# WHY AESTHETIC VALUE JUDGEMENTS CANNOT BE JUSTIFIED

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The article is part of a longer argument, the gist of which stands in direct opposition to the claim implied by the article's title. The ambition of that larger whole is to offer a theory of art evaluation together with a theoretical model showing how aesthetic value judgements can be inter-subjectively tested and justified. Here the author therefore plays devil's advocate by citing, strengthening, and inventing arguments against the very possibility of justification or explanation of aesthetic judgements. The reason is his conviction that such arguments have not been fully met. The article is thus intended as a challenge: any theory of art evaluation which assumes, or tries to establish, that some works of art are better than others or that aesthetic judgements are not just statements expressing personal likes and dislikes, should show how such arguments can be demolished.

Warum ästhetische Werturteile nicht begründet werden können

Dieser Artikel ist Teil einer weiter ausgreifenden Argumentation, deren Pointe in direktem Widerspruch zum im Titel angedeuteten Anspruch steht. Dieses größere Ganze zielt darauf ab, eine Theorie von Kunstbewertung und gleichzeitig ein theoretisches Modell bereitzustellen, das zeigt, wie ästhetische Werturteile intersubjektiv überprüft und begründet werden können. Hier spiele ich die Rolle eines advocatus diaboli, indem ich Argumente gegen die Möglichkeit zitiere und untermauere, ästhetische Werturteile zu begründen oder zu explizieren. Dahinter steht meine Überzeugung, dass solche Argumente noch nicht ausreichend diskutiert wurden. Der Artikel ist also als Herausforderung zu verstehen: jede Theorie von Kunstbewertung, die annimmt oder wahrscheinlich machen will, dass manche Kunstwerke besser sind als andere oder dass ästhetische Urteile nicht nur Aussagen über persönliche Vorlieben und Abneigungen sind, sollte zeigen, wie solche Argumente zunichte gemacht werden können.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is not entirely self-contained. The deliberations presented here are part of a more extended argument the gist of which stands in direct opposition to the claim implied by the present title. The ambition of that larger whole is to offer a theory of art evaluation together with a theoretical model showing how aesthetic value judgements can be inter-subjectively tested and ultimately justified. In the present article I will thus only play the devil's advocate by citing, strengthening, and inventing arguments against the very possibility of justification or explanation of aesthetic value judgements. The reason for this is my conviction that these sceptical arguments have not been fully confronted. The conclusions of this article could thus be seen as a challenge: any theory of art evaluation which is based on the assumption that some works of art are

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This article was made possible by generous funding from the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, GA ČR 408/07/0909.

better than others and purports to show that aesthetic judgements are not just statements expressing personal likes and dislikes should show how the arguments of the kind presented here can be diffused.

I shall base my arguments on the famous essay of Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts'<sup>1</sup> and its central thesis that aesthetic terms are not governed by rules. I will show that although the thesis is invalid in the form that Sibley has presented it, there is an important core of truth in his analysis, the consequences of which have not been fully appreciated.

In the first section I sum up the main theses and arguments of Sibley's essay, which are relevant to this article. In Section 2, I present Eddy Zemach's criticism of Sibley with the three purported refutations of his main thesis. I then, in Section 3, critically examine Zemach's claims and show where they are mistaken. Zemach's mistakes will nevertheless be shown to be instructive in the sense that their critical analysis leads to a better understanding of different possible interpretations of Sibley's theory. In Section 4, I present my own criticism of Sibley's thesis. I will show that it is not valid in its universal form, that it does not hold for all aesthetic concepts. I will demonstrate that although it is valid for positive aesthetic judgements it does not hold for descriptive aesthetic concepts just as it does not apply to negative evaluative aesthetic concepts, which *are* governed by rules. The scope of Sibley's thesis has therefore to be restricted if counterexamples are to be avoided. In Section 5, I offer two new arguments, which strengthen Sibley's restricted thesis. I also argue that its significance as a radical negative claim with direct implications both for criticism and for the theory of art evaluation remains undiminished. Having concluded (with Sibley) that categorical positive aesthetic value judgements cannot be justified, I then, in the last section, raise the question of whether we can at least establish comparative aesthetic judgements alleging that some works of art are better than others. I argue that we cannot do even this, because the aesthetic qualities, which we would want to compare, turn out to be incommensurable. This, I will show, applies not only to works that are executed in different styles, but also to those that belong to the same categories, that is, to works that are considered very similar indeed. I thus end with a very sceptical, if not paradoxical, conclusion that we have no rational basis whatsoever even for the comparative aesthetic judgements that we habitually make.

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Philosophical Review* 67 (1959); reprinted in Joseph Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978). All page references appearing in parentheses in the text are to this edition.

## I. SIBLEY'S THESIS

Sibley begins his essay by drawing our attention to the fact that we can describe works of art in two different ways. We can say, for example, 'that a novel has a great number of characters and deals with life in a manufacturing town; that a painting uses pale colours, predominantly blues and greens, and has kneeling figures in the foreground; that a theme in a fugue is inverted at a certain point, and that there is stretto at the coda'. Sibley notes, 'such remarks may be made by anyone [...] with normal eyes, ears and intelligence' (64). 'On the other hand,' he continues, 'we also say that a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving; that a picture lacks balance, or has a certain serenity and repose, or that the grouping of the figures sets up an exciting tension' (64). While the first kind of description refers to non-aesthetic features of different kinds of artworks and use non-aesthetic terms, the second refers to their aesthetic features and employs aesthetic terms.

Sibley explains what he means by aesthetic terms by enumerating examples he considers paradigmatic and by offering a general characterization: 'When a word or expression is such that taste or perceptiveness is required in order to apply it, I shall call it an *aesthetic* term or expression, and I shall, correspondingly, speak of *aesthetic* concepts or *taste* concepts' (64).

Accordingly, two people can agree about all the non-aesthetic properties of a given work of art, yet disagree (even sharply) about their aesthetic qualities. '[A] man need not be stupid or have poor eyesight to fail to see that something is graceful' (65).

Sibley is interested in the relations between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties and in the manner the critic uses aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts in the course of explaining or justifying his judgements. He notes that when the critic explains why the work has a certain aesthetic quality he may refer to other aesthetic features. He can, for example, say: 'It has an extraordinary vitality because of its free and vigorous style of drawing' (66). This may sometimes be useful, but an ultimate explanation, according to Sibley, is the one where the presence of aesthetic features is explained with reference to non-aesthetic ones, like, for example: 'delicate because of its pastel shades and curving lines' (66). The reason only this latter kind of reference can be considered a genuine explanation is that the aesthetic properties ultimately derive from the non-aesthetic ones.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sibley explains: 'When no explanation of this latter kind is offered, it is legitimate to ask or search for one. [...] When we cannot ourselves quite say what non-aesthetic features make something delicate or unbalanced or powerful or moving, the good critic often puts his finger on something which strikes us as the right explanation'. *Ibid.*, 66.

One way of stating Sibley's thesis briefly is to say that while he insists that the aesthetic properties are ontologically dependent on the non-aesthetic ones, he is equally adamant that there are no logical or epistemological connections between aesthetic concepts and non-aesthetic concepts. More specifically: no information about the non-aesthetic features of a given work could ever be sufficient for the correct ascription of its aesthetic properties. Concerning the first kind of dependence Sibley states: 'Aesthetic terms ultimately apply because of, and aesthetic qualities always ultimately depend upon, the presence of features which, like curving or angular lines, color contrasts, placing of masses, or speed of movement, are visible, audible, or otherwise discernible without any exercise of taste or sensibility' (66).

Yet in what immediately follows he claims: 'Whatever kind of dependence this is [...], what I want to make clear in this paper is that there are no non-aesthetic features which serve in *any* circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms. Aesthetic or taste concepts are not in *this* respect condition-governed at all' (64). Since the following two sections of my paper are devoted to questions concerning the validity of this claim, its possible interpretations and explanations, let me now jump straight to the question of its significance, on the assumption that it is true.

To claim that aesthetic concepts are not governed by rules is to deny the possibility that the connections between non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties can be generalized into statements like 'Any object that has such and such non-aesthetic properties will have this or that aesthetic property'. Now, when the critic tells us, for example, that a given work of art is well balanced, it is legitimate to ask for the explanation or justification of his claims. But if Sibley's thesis is true, then no such explanation or justification will ever be forthcoming. For, as we have learnt from Carl Hempel,<sup>3</sup> a set of sentences can constitute an explanation only if it exhibits the pattern of a 'Deductive-Nomological' model (that is, a model concerned with laws), where the *explanandum* (the thing-to-be-explained) follows from the *explanans* (the premises of the argument). The *explanans* has to contain, apart from *initial conditions* (a non-aesthetic description of a given work of art in our case), at least one premise with a law-like generalization. Hempel is concerned mainly with scientific explanation but his scheme applies to explanations in general. For, to explain is to subsume a particular case under a general rule. But this is exactly what Sibley's thesis precludes. Thus whatever it is that the critic is doing, he is not *explaining* his judgements – at least not in the usual sense of

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

'explaining'.<sup>4</sup> In brief: if Sibley is right then aesthetic judgements cannot be justified.<sup>5</sup>

Sibley is expressing his negative claim throughout his essay in many different formulations. Let me quote here just one more: 'Though on *seeing* the picture we might say, and rightly, that it is delicate or serene or restful or sickly or insipid, no description in non-aesthetic terms permits us to claim that these or any other aesthetic terms *must undeniably* apply to it' (68; my emphasis).

Formulations like this might tempt one to interpret Sibley as merely claiming that on the basis of information about the non-aesthetic properties we cannot state with absolute *certainty* what aesthetic properties the work has. This would still leave open the possibility that we could make such predictions with high probability. Since Sibley acknowledges that aesthetic properties depend on the non-aesthetic ones, could we not say that although we cannot have justifications for aesthetic judgements that guarantee their truths we may still have explanations that will render them probable? Unfortunately, as one reads on it becomes apparent that Sibley actually argues for a much stronger claim to the effect that the information about non-aesthetic features of the work might not even raise the probability of the correct application of aesthetic terms. The reason for this is, to put it briefly, the irreducible uniqueness of works of art. The aesthetic properties will in each particular case depend on a different combination of non-aesthetic ones and the same non-aesthetic features in different works might go together with quite different – even opposing – aesthetic qualities. Sibley emphasizes that the same non-aesthetic features may contribute to the aesthetic value of one work yet detract from its merits in another:

The very same feature, say color or shape or line of a particular sort, which may help one work may quite spoil another (74).

One poem has strength and power because of regularity of its meter and rhyme; another is monotonous and lacks drive and strength because of its regular meter and rhyme. We do not feel the need to switch from 'because of' to 'in spite of' (70).

A failure and a success in the manner of Degas may be generally more alike, so far as their non-aesthetic features go, than either is like a successful Fragonard (69).

<sup>4</sup> The same applies to justification, for explanation and justification come to the same thing in this context. I am concerned here only with the first part of Sibley's essay. I shall deal with the second part, where Sibley discusses the methods critics use to make us see what they perceive, elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> He acknowledges: 'An examination of the locution we use when we refer to them in the course of explaining or supporting our application of an aesthetic term reinforces with linguistic evidence the fact that we are certainly not offering them as explanatory or justifying conditions.' Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 76.

When we put all these claims together, we end up with a negative thesis that is radical indeed. For if the aforementioned claims are true, we may infer that the information concerning the non-aesthetic features of the work is *quite irrelevant* even to estimating its aesthetic qualities. No wonder that those who realized the incompatibility of Sibley's thesis with objectivist theories of aesthetic judgements, and had some theoretical stakes in them, had to try to refute or discredit it.

## II. EDDY ZEMACH'S CRITICISM

There were of course others besides Zemach who criticized Sibley.<sup>6</sup> My reason for choosing him is that I consider his critical analysis to be the most systematic and the most thorough. This may not be accidental. Zemach has realized how strong the impact of Sibley's sceptical thesis is, and how negative its implications are for any objectivist theory of aesthetic value. He understood that Sibley has to be refuted if his own objectivist theory is to gain any credence.<sup>7</sup> This is why he took no chances to stake his refutation on a single argument, but sought every possible angle from which to assault Sibley's theory.<sup>8</sup> Part of this criticism may be mistaken, but Zemach's mistakes are instructive; they lead us to distinguish between different possible interpretations of the claims about the relationship between non-aesthetic properties and aesthetic concepts.

Zemach tries to discredit Sibley's conclusions from the very outset. He begins by questioning what he takes to be Sibley's definition of aesthetic concepts, pointing out that Sibley's recourse to the notion of taste is a bad move:

<sup>6</sup> For example: David Broiles, 'Frank Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23 (1964); Isabel Hungerland, 'The Logic of Aesthetic Concepts', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 36 (1963); Isabel Hungerland, 'Once Again, Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 26 (1968); J. F. Logan, 'More on Aesthetic Concepts', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25 (1967); Joseph Margolis, 'Sibley on Aesthetic Perception', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25 (1966); H. R. G. Schwyzer, 'Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts"', *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963); Gary Stahl, 'Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts": An Ontological Mistake', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29 (1971). See also Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson, eds., *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays after Sibley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), which includes papers by Emily Brady, Ted Cohen, Nick McAdoon, Eddy Zemach, Jerrold Levinson, John E. MacKinnon, Peter Lamarque, Nick Zangwill, Colin Lyas, T. J. Diffey, Cheryl Foster, Peter Kivy, and John Benson.

<sup>7</sup> The theory is presented in his *Real Beauty* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> In his *Mavo le-esteṭiḳah* [Introduction to aesthetics] (Tel Aviv: Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1976; in Hebrew) Zemach devotes a whole section (210–16) to criticism of Sibley. In an abbreviated form this criticism also appears in his later book *Real Beauty* (8–99).

One cannot explain one unclear notion with reference to another notion, which is just as unclear. Worse than that, the expression 'taste' usually occurs in sentences like 'x has (has no) taste' which are quite synonymous with sentences like 'x pronounces aesthetic claims that are appropriate (not appropriate)'. They stand and fall together.<sup>9</sup>

Zemach then turns to Sibley's central claim that aesthetic concepts are not governed by rules. Zemach considers that claim mistaken on three counts.

(1) The first is linked to the 'transcendental argument of the Wittgensteinian type' and purports to show that Sibley's stance is inconsistent:

If a concept would not be governed by rules, one would not be able to distinguish between its correct and incorrect use, which means that it would be meaningless. However, since aesthetic concepts are, according to Sibley, meaningful, it just cannot be the case that their use is not governed by rules.<sup>10</sup>

(2) Zemach's second reason for rejecting Sibley's thesis is the allegation that it is refuted daily by the most common practice:

It happens every day that one describes to a friend an object, on the basis of which the friend forms a conclusion about its aesthetic properties. This is most frequent with movies and theatre plays. A man asks his friend for a description (employing nonaesthetic terms) of a film or a theatre play and concludes that it is dramatic, delicate, sophisticated, and very often too whether it is aesthetically good or bad.<sup>11</sup>

Zemach readily admits that such conclusions can be mistaken with the reminder that all empirical judgements are fallible. What he insists on, however, is that the information about the non-aesthetic properties of the object increases the probability of the correct application of aesthetic predicates. Together with this, Zemach insists that 'stronger relations also exist: a score is a (mostly) non-aesthetic description of a piece of music, yet it gives a good idea of the aesthetic traits of the work'.<sup>12</sup>

(3) 'Thirdly,' Zemach continues, 'Sibley cannot logically hold the above-described view and assert at the same time that ontologically aesthetic terms ultimately apply because of, and aesthetic qualities always ultimately depend upon, the presence of features which [...] are visible, audible, or otherwise discernible without any exercise of taste or sensibility.'<sup>13</sup> Zemach is convinced that Sibley's stance must harbour a contradiction, for if, as Sibley himself insists,

<sup>9</sup> Zemach, *Mavo le-esteṭiḳah*, 212.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 212–13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Zemach, *Real Beauty*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Zemach, *Mavo le-esteṭiḳah*, 213.

'the aesthetic properties depend ontologically on the regular (physical, chemical) properties of the object,' then it cannot be the case that 'no conjunction of non-aesthetic properties could ever constitute a sufficient condition for correct application of any aesthetic property to an object'.<sup>14</sup> Zemach presents his disagreement with Sibley as a dispute over the question 'Will a snob who pretends to have aesthetic taste but has none be caught?' Sibley says, Yes; Zemach says, No. Zemach agrees with Sibley that the snob 'cannot see a line as coarse or as delicate', but counters that 'he can use non-aesthetic cues to distinguish coarse objects from delicate ones'.<sup>15</sup> He explains: 'Relying on nonaesthetic cues will not bring the snob one step closer to acquaintance with aesthetic properties, but the inability to see things *as* delicate or *as* coarse is not inability to tell whether a thing is coarse or delicate.'<sup>16</sup>

Zemach is convinced that 'Sibley is mixing up the inability of the aesthetically blind snob to grasp the meaning of "delicate" and "coarse" with the inability to identify delicate and coarse objects'. He believes that the relationship between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties is 'analogical to the relationship between predicates like "red" or "green", and descriptions like "light-wave of the length of  $x$  angstrom" or "light-wave of the length of  $y$  angstrom"'. He asserts:

It is impossible that an object would be red and not reflect light of the wavelength  $x$ . The dependence of the concept of *red* on the concept of a *beam of light of the wavelength  $x$  angstrom* is an ontological dependence. Yet the concept of *red* is entirely independent of the concept of *beam of light of the wavelength  $x$  angstrom* epistemologically. One may know that an object is red without knowing that it reflects light with the wavelength of  $x$  angstrom, just as one may know that an object reflects light with the wavelength of  $x$  angstrom, and not know that it is red.<sup>17</sup>

Zemach claims that the snob who cannot tell the delicate from the coarse is like the colour-blind physicist who cannot tell red from green but can identify the wavelengths reflected by red and green objects.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Zemach, *Real Beauty*, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Zemach, *Mavo le-esteṭiqah*, 213–14.

<sup>18</sup> 'He [the snob] can [...] learn what are physical conditions, which make certain objects delicate or coarse, even though he will never see any object as delicate or as coarse. His situation is like the situation of the blind physicist. The physicist does not know what red is and will never understand the meaning of the concept "red". Yet he can distinguish precisely, with no mistake, which objects are red and which are not red, since as a physicist he can measure the wavelengths of the light reflected by those objects.' Zemach, *Real Beauty*, 114.



### III. IS ZEMACH RIGHT?

Let us consider Zemach's observations one by one: The two points about invoking the concept of taste are both well taken. This concept is indeed as much in need of explanation as is the notion of aesthetic concepts, and Zemach is right too in hinting that explaining the meaning of 'aesthetic concepts' with reference to 'taste' is circular. For if we ask what aesthetic concepts are, the answer is concepts, for the correct application of which one has to exercise taste. But if we go on and inquire what taste is, the only answer Sibley offers is it constitutes the ability correctly to apply aesthetic concepts. This clearly is a vicious circle.<sup>19</sup> Is, then, Sibley's thesis invalid? It is not. Sibley does not offer a definition of aesthetic concepts. He assumes that we know what aesthetic concepts are, and he wants to tell us something interesting about them. This is legitimate, because one cannot, after all, be expected to define all the concepts one is using. And we do know, roughly, what 'aesthetic concepts' mean, since we know how to use them. This is not to say that we are not in need of their definition. Sibley, however, is not the man to turn to, since he has not promised a definition.

Zemach's 'transcendental argument' (point 1) is also off the mark. It is simply not the case that one cannot, on Sibley's account, distinguish between the correct and the incorrect use of aesthetic concepts. When Sibley emphasizes that 'there are some respects in which aesthetic terms *are* governed by conditions and rules', and specifies further that 'taste concepts may be governed *negatively* by conditions' (68), he wants to show under which conditions an aesthetic term would be used incorrectly: 'If I am told that a painting in the next room consists solely of one or two bars of very pale blue and very pale gray set at right angles on a pale fawn ground, I can be sure that it cannot be fiery or garish or gaudy or flamboyant' (ibid.).<sup>20</sup> Sibley's thesis cannot therefore be dismissed as inconsistent.

Zemach's second argument (point 2) has to be considered more carefully. I shall examine his 'counterexamples' case by case, since they pose problems with different logical structures and call for different solutions. Let me begin with the musical example. Can the non-aesthetic description provided by the score suffice for judging the work aesthetically? Of course it can – Zemach is right. If the score describes the work *fully*, there can be no logical reason why it should not provide sufficient information for valid conclusions about its

<sup>19</sup> The reference to taste would be informative if Sibley had (like, for example, Francis Hutcheson) offered an independent empirical characterization of this faculty.

<sup>20</sup> Sibley goes on to explain: 'A description of this sort may make certain aesthetic terms *inapplicable* or *inappropriate*; and if from this description I inferred that the picture was, or even might be, fiery or gaudy or flamboyant, this might be taken as showing a failure to understand these words.'

aesthetic qualities. Consider, for argument's sake, denying this claim. What would it mean to say that Smith is unable to estimate the aesthetic qualities of a work on the basis of its score? It could either mean that Smith cannot read the score, or that he is not 'musical' enough, or that he has a limited imagination. In any case it would *not* mean that inferring information about aesthetic properties from this non-aesthetic description is impossible in principle.

To see Zemach's point more clearly, let me translate his musical example to poetry. Consider a non-aesthetic description of William Blake's poem 'The Lily',<sup>21</sup> which goes as follows: The first word is 'The', the second word is 'modest', the third is 'Rose', the fourth is 'puts', followed by 'forth', followed by 'a', followed by 'thorn'; the second line begins with 'The', the second word is 'humble', followed by 'sheep', followed by 'a', followed by 'threat'ning', followed by 'horn'... etc. Evidently, it *must* be possible to determine the poem's aesthetic features since the poem itself forms a subset of this description.

One might object that recipients' aesthetic experiences would differ from that of listening to the poem itself; that listing of items – 'the first word', 'the second word', 'followed by' – impairs its reception. The quality of the aesthetic experience would be inferior to that of listening to the poem itself, just as the experience of reading the score would be different and aesthetically inferior to that of listening to the music.

These observations are of course true. If one made them in defence of Sibley, however, one would have to point out that they are beside the point. For Sibley's thesis is not about the obvious differences between aesthetic experiences resulting from a non-aesthetic description and those occasioned by the work itself. That would be a psychological claim, and not a particularly interesting one at that. The impossibility of drawing 'aesthetic' conclusions from non-aesthetic premises, which Sibley asserts, is a philosophical (epistemological) thesis and not a contingent observation about the limits of our imagination.

Disregarding the distinction between the allographic and autographic works, Zemach extends his argument also to the visual arts: 'with a standard color-numbering system and a coordinate system, we can describe a painting by number triads (the first two identifying a place and the third gives the color). Surely one can learn something from such descriptions.'<sup>22</sup> Assuming that such

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<sup>21</sup> The Lily

by William Blake

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn,  
The humble sheep a threat'ning horn:  
While the Lily white shall in love delight,  
Nor a thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.

<sup>22</sup> Zemach, *Real Beauty*, 100.

a description is indeed exhaustive,<sup>23</sup> Zemach's conclusion again appears to be correct. Objections are nevertheless again to be expected. The most likely one will point out that no person reading the numbers of Zemach's triads would visualize the painting, let alone its aesthetic properties.

Like the two preceding objections, this one is true but beside the point – Sibley's thesis is not about anyone's ability or lack thereof to visualize something. The point is that if (all) the properties of the painting are encoded into the non-aesthetic description, and there exists a procedure for decoding this information into a faithful copy, then it must be possible to determine its aesthetic properties.

So, is Sibley refuted? That depends on whether we should consider examples of this kind – exhaustive full descriptions – covered by his thesis. The answer may not be obvious at first, because although it is clear that Sibley is concerned with the usual practice of art criticism, in which such descriptions never occur, some formulations of his thesis are not exempt from counterexamples of this kind. Here is one of them: 'Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms *as fully as we please* but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced' (68; my italics). This formulation clearly allows full descriptions, and since Zemach's arguments are valid, the conclusion Sibley is stating here is wrong.

The question is how damaging this is to Sibley's thesis. Is the claim that aesthetic concepts are not governed by rules refuted? I argue that it is not. The reason is that in the context of Sibley's argument there is a sharp and qualitative difference between full descriptions and partial ones.

To see this more clearly, let us ask first what it is that Sibley is denying? As we noted earlier, he is denying the existence of *rules* governing the use of aesthetic concepts. He is ruling out that the connections between non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties can be *generalized* into *law-like* statements of the form

$$\forall x [(Ax \wedge Bx \wedge Cx \wedge Dx \wedge \dots N_x) \rightarrow \phi x].^{24}$$

He is not denying that in every particular case aesthetic properties of the work are determined by (the sum total of) its non-aesthetic features.<sup>25</sup> For when the

<sup>23</sup> One could argue, together with Nelson Goodman, that the properties of the syntactically and semantically dense media of painting can never be faithfully rendered by a discrete (digital) description.

<sup>24</sup> Every object that has the non-aesthetic properties A, B, C, ... N, will have the aesthetic property  $\phi$ .

<sup>25</sup> He is actually stressing it: Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 66.

antecedent of this generalized implication does not contain merely a few general characteristics but specifies (with full description) all the particulars of a given work, it ceases to function as a law-like generalization; it turns into a singular statement asserting that a particular work (with such and such non-aesthetic properties) has a certain aesthetic quality.<sup>26</sup> Zemach's examples cannot therefore be construed as counterexamples, since Sibley's thesis concerning the absence of rules was not intended to preclude such cases.

Zemach may have anticipated this line of defence because in the sequel to the passage just quoted he adds: 'Even if the description is partial, omitting various details, do these omissions completely annul its ability to tell us about the aesthetic properties of the work?' He answers:

Of course not. A partial nonaesthetic description is all that we usually get, yet we can, and do, make an educated (though fallible) guess about the aesthetic character of the work (say a movie) so described. The less nonaesthetic information we get, the less we know about the aesthetic properties of the object described, but with a reasonable amount of background information we can (defeasibly) aesthetically evaluate the object.<sup>27</sup>

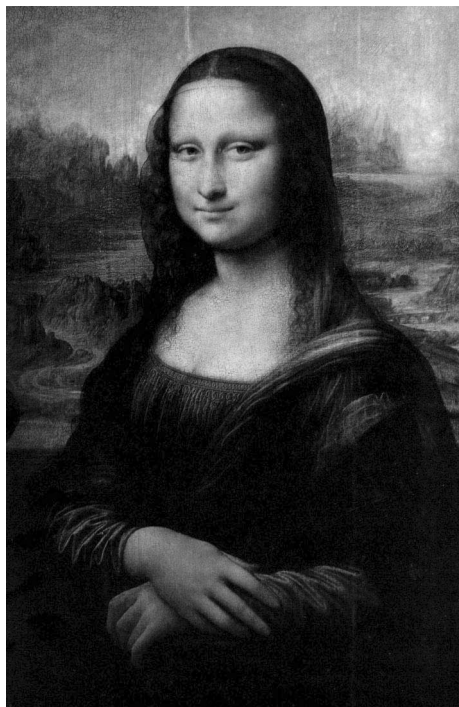
In other words: the amount of information about the non-aesthetic features is proportional to the degree of certainty with which we determine aesthetic qualities. If a full description is sufficient to determine these qualities with certainty, we can, with few omissions, determine them with near certainty. The certainty decreases with decreasing information, but even a very partial description will suffice for a reasonably good estimate of the work's aesthetic worth.

This kind of cumulative principle may work in some statistical contexts, but as far as art is concerned it is utterly useless. Zemach's slippery slope argument breaks down already at its first step, that is, at the transition from the certainty of the full description to the near certainty of a nearly full description. Consider Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*.

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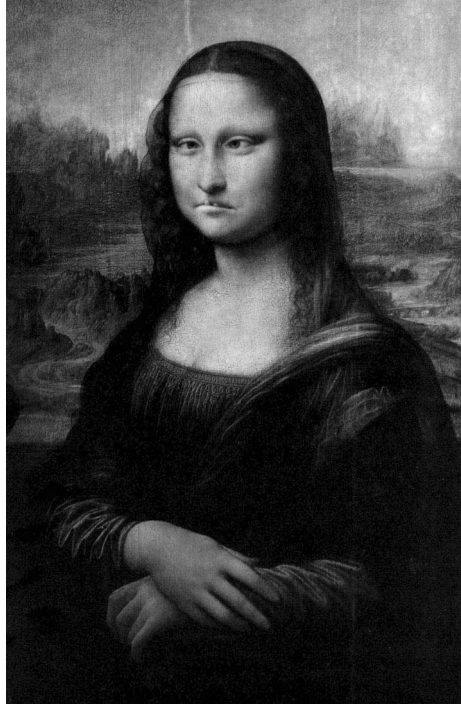
<sup>26</sup> This may not be immediately obvious due to the logical form of generalized implication, which becomes, in this case, misleading. It should read as follows: 'Every object that has all and only those non-aesthetic properties (as work of art **w**) will have the aesthetic property  $\phi$ ,' which is the same as 'All objects identical with **w** will have the aesthetic property  $\phi$ ,' which is just another way of saying that **w** has the property  $\phi$ , in short:  $\phi w$ .

<sup>27</sup> Zemach, *Real Beauty*, 100.



Experts agree that the painting is aesthetically remarkable because of La Gioconda's facial expression and her mysterious smile. The smile looks as it does because of the peculiar shape of the line separating her lips – altering it would destroy the air of mystery for which the painting is admired. However, the non-aesthetic differences between da Vinci's masterpiece and its aesthetically wrecked version – whether measured by the discrepancies of the two triadic descriptions or simply by the percentage of the area where the pictures differ to the area of the whole canvas – would be numerically negligible. Even if one altered Mona Lisa's expression by making her cross-eyed and twisting her mouth so that the air of mystery assumed a somewhat degenerate flair, more than ninety-nine per cent of the triads would still be identical with the original (see next page).

This clearly shows that even a description, which is nearly full, does not enable us to predict (let alone with near certainty) that the work will have the aesthetic quality  $\phi$ , the quality that could be determined with certainty on the basis of a full description. But if this is so, are we not entitled to conclude that the information concerning just a few non-aesthetic features (which is all we usually get) would be hopelessly insufficient for making *any* aesthetic conclusions whatsoever?



Before answering this question, let us consider Zemach's analogy, in which he likens the aesthetically blind snob to the colour-blind physicist, together with the claim that the snob can bluff his way through debates on art. Zemach is right that the secondary qualities (red, green) and the aesthetic qualities (delicate, coarse) have their physical correlates. But is this enough to establish the claim that like the colour-blind physicist who learns the wavelengths of colours, and can therefore 'predict' which colour a given object has, the snob can learn which non-aesthetic properties correspond to the aesthetic ones, so that he can likewise tell whether an object is harmonious or coarse? The answer is that it is not, for Zemach's argument begs the question: it assumes precisely what is to be established – namely, that different occurrences of the same aesthetic property are concomitant with the same configuration of the non-aesthetic features. This assumption is, however, plainly false, and the reason is simple: while the connections between the secondary qualities and the primary ones are law-like, those between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities are not. (Note that this is just another way of stating Sibley's thesis.) Since every work of art is unique, no two artworks correctly described as well balanced will have identical non-aesthetic properties (unless one is a copy of the other). Each individual occurrence of this aesthetic property will be formed by a different set

of non-aesthetic features. Thus every work correctly described as well balanced or harmonious will acquire this quality because it successfully harmonizes just those non-aesthetic elements and features from which it is composed. These are, however, unique to each particular work and must necessarily differ from any other well-harmonized work.

Let me illustrate this. We can agree, I assume, that the following three paintings are all well balanced, that their compositions are harmonious, that each of them can serve as an example of a successful harmonization of the elements and features that have been assembled within its frame. Yet there is nothing that the three pictures have in common, apart from the fact that the aesthetic predicate 'well balanced' applies to them.



Gentile Bellini, *Miracle of the True Cross at the Bridge of S. Lorenzo*



Alexej von Jawlensky, *Portrait of Alexander Sacharoff*



Georges Braque, *Still Life with Grapes and Clarinet*

Aesthetic properties such as 'being well balanced' are thus *indexical* in the sense that they are specific to each individual work and differ from instance to instance: the harmonization of (non-aesthetic) features and elements in Bellini's painting is quite different from that in Jawlensky's portrait, which again differ from those of the well-balanced composition of Braque's still life.

This may clear away another query presented (in point 3) by Zemach as the third reason why Sibley's thesis cannot be right. Zemach wonders how Sibley can insist that aesthetic features ultimately depend on non-aesthetic ones and say at the same time that they are not governed by rules. Clearly, there is no contradiction here. For once we realize that aesthetic properties are indexical (in the sense just explained), we also realize that the relations between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities (unlike that between colours and wavelengths) are unique. The ontological dependence of aesthetic qualities on non-aesthetic features in each particular instance does not imply any regularity or law-like connection.

Have we thus shown that Zemach's criticism is beside the point? Not quite. We may have identified some misinterpretations and misguided arguments, but we still have not examined Zemach's main charge – namely, that Sibley's thesis is refuted by everyday experience. The fact that Zemach offers no argument in its support is regrettable, but it is not good enough a reason to dismiss it. For can we seriously deny that on the basis of a description of the plot and the characters of a movie, play, or a novel, we can ever make an educated guess about *some* of its aesthetic properties? If someone tells me the basics of the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, am I not entitled to conclude



that the play is likely to be dramatic and tragic? Zemach's empirical claim clearly deserves further consideration.

#### IV. SIBLEY RECONSIDERED

The problem with Sibley's thesis is its scope. The alleged impossibility of 'being governed by rules' is asserted with respect to a very broad array of concepts called aesthetic without making any distinctions as to their character, purpose or function. The general criterion, according to which 'the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation' (63) is required for the correct application of aesthetic terms, is, as we shall see, insufficient for demonstrating their exceptional nature.

When we consider aesthetic concepts – whether those on Sibley's list or those that are generally considered as such – we might note that they do not form a homogeneous class. Among the many distinctions one could make, two will be relevant here. Some aesthetic terms, like 'beautiful', 'elegant', 'graceful', 'well balanced', 'ugly', 'incoherent', 'disorganized', and 'kitschy', are *normative*; they are typically used as evaluative expressions, which imply praise or disapproval. Others, like 'tragic', 'dramatic', 'grotesque', 'epic', 'lyric', 'Gothic', 'Baroque', and 'Cubist', are *descriptive*; they do not imply any value judgement but they tell us something about the kind of work and its global structure. If I am told that a painting is beautiful (or ugly), I may conclude that it is likely to please (or displease) me; it will, however, tell me nothing about its character, its salient features, or the kind of organization of its constitutive elements. When, on the other hand, I am told that the picture is Cubist, for example, I will not know whether it will please or displease me (Cubist paintings can be good or bad), but I will know (roughly) what to expect as to its character, salient features, and its kind of organization.

I would argue that Sibley's thesis does not hold for the descriptive aesthetic concepts. Consider the following example: Smith has never been to Paris, nor has he seen any pictures of Notre-Dame Cathedral. He is, however, given a short description stating that the building is considerably taller than it is wide, that its verticality is further emphasized by towers, spires, and long narrow windows; the pointed arch, the ribbed vault, the flying buttresses, and the plan of the Latin cross ('cruciform') are also mentioned as salient features. Would it not be reasonable to expect that Smith, who is assumed to be intelligent and interested in the arts, will conclude that the structure is Gothic? Similar considerations will apply not only to all other stylistic terms,<sup>28</sup> but also to quite

<sup>28</sup> Neither the term Gothic nor any other adjective of style appears on Sibley's list of aesthetic expressions. One could nevertheless argue that discerning stylistic

a few other concepts – like tragic, dramatic, and dynamic – that appear on Sibley's list of aesthetic expressions. Consider, for example, an accurate description of the plot of Clarence Brown's film version of *Anna Karenina* (1935), which would also specify some scene sequences, close-ups, and dramatic effects, without mentioning any aesthetic properties. Would not such a description be sufficient for reaching the conclusion that the film is dynamic, dramatic, moving, and tragic? And when you are told that it is Greta Garbo who plays Anna, will you not expect that it will also be full of pathos? Clearly, Zemach is right and Sibley is wrong as far as descriptive aesthetic terms are concerned.<sup>29</sup>

And what about evaluative terms, those that have normative import? Is Zemach also right when he claims that on the basis of partial non-aesthetic descriptions we can conclude that 'a film or a theatre play [...] is dramatic, delicate, sophisticated, and very often too whether it is aesthetically good or bad'? Here we have to make another distinction: that between positive and negative aesthetic judgements. Some evaluative aesthetic terms, like 'beautiful', 'fascinating', 'well balanced', 'unified', or 'graceful', have clearly positive connotations, others like 'ugly', 'boring', 'confused', 'garish', or 'kitschy', have negative ones. I would suggest that although we are not able to specify the non-aesthetic features that qualify a work as deserving to be denoted by a positive aesthetic term, we can state conditions which will disqualify it from receiving such honours. And we can often not only state conditions that disqualify an application of a positive aesthetic term, but also conditions that warrant an application of its opposites.

Let us consider a few examples. Take the predicates 'fascinating' and 'boring' as applied to theatre plays, and 'beautiful' and 'ugly' as applied to human faces. I agree with Sibley that we are unable to state sufficient non-aesthetic

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properties requires perceptiveness and aesthetic discrimination. Moreover, style adjectives are as a rule considered aesthetic, since they denote aesthetic properties exemplified by the work. See, for example, Nelson Goodman, 'The Status of Style', in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> One could forestall this conclusion by insisting that the aesthetic concepts I have termed 'descriptive' are not really aesthetic, that aesthetic concepts require normative import to qualify as aesthetic. One can argue, and with some plausibility, that one need not employ the faculty of taste in order to tell that something is Gothic, dramatic, or tragic, that these sortal concepts (denoting styles, genres, or other typological categories) are not *taste concepts*. The problem is that this does not accord well with the established practice. Most aestheticians have the tendency to use the term 'aesthetic concepts' in a much wider sense and to consider the normative aesthetic judgements their subset, which is often called 'verdicts'. We may note that apart from taste Sibley also lists perceptiveness and the ability of aesthetic discrimination as criteria of being aesthetic. Be that as it may, my argument, as we shall see, does not depend on taking a position on this matter.

conditions for the correct application of 'fascinating' to a play or 'beautiful' to a human face. I would, however, side with Zemach as to the negative evaluative aesthetic terms. For if we are told, for example, that what happens on the stage during the first three minutes is repeated without any change for the duration of the performance which lasts two hours, we can be reasonably sure that the play is boring. And if we were told that a woman's nose is more than six inches long, that her left eye is grey and the right one pink, that her pale cheeks are sprinkled with furuncles, and her twisted smile reveals three brownish teeth, would we not be entitled to conclude that she is ugly?<sup>30</sup>

If one objects that the last counterexample has nothing to do with art, let me briefly mention another one, which does. The noun 'kitsch', or the adjective 'kitschy', clearly qualifies as aesthetic since the exercise of taste is required to apply the concept correctly. 'A man need not be stupid or have poor eyesight to fail to see that something is [kitsch],' Sibley would say. But is it really the case that this concept is not governed by rules? In a book titled *Kitsch and Art* I have argued that the concept of kitsch is governed by three necessary conditions, which can jointly also be considered sufficient. And as it happens, no aesthetic properties are mentioned in any of the three conditions. Let me restate them here:

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The object or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our association relating to the depicted objects or themes.<sup>31</sup>

If this characterization is even roughly correct, then at least some negative evaluative concepts *are* governed by rules.<sup>32</sup> Is Sibley's thesis therefore refuted? Even though, as we have seen, in its general form, which covers all aesthetic concepts, it is indeed invalid, it would be a grave mistake to dismiss it. For even if we can state conditions for the application of descriptive aesthetic terms and

<sup>30</sup> As a matter of fact Sibley considers, if somewhat hesitatingly (and in a footnote), 'ugly' a candidate for a counterexample with a very similar description, but only to dismiss it as 'cases [that] are marginal, form a very small minority, and are uncharacteristic or atypical of aesthetic judgments in general' Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 85–6.

<sup>31</sup> Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 37–8.

<sup>32</sup> We should bear in mind the strong interpretation of Sibley's thesis according to which non-aesthetic descriptions cannot even raise the probability of the correct application of aesthetic terms.

conditions for negative aesthetic evaluative terms, Sibley is right about positive aesthetic value judgements. His thesis has therefore to be restricted if counterexamples are to be avoided. In the next section I offer two arguments in support of the restricted thesis and make some comments about its significance.

#### V. SIBLEY'S LEGACY

My first argument has a pragmatic flavour and I present it in a form of indirect proof: Suppose that positive aesthetic concepts such as 'beautiful', 'fascinating', 'exquisitely balanced', were governed by rules, that is, that we could specify in advance sufficient conditions for their correct application. Note that if we could thus predict when a composition of a painting, for example, will be exquisitely balanced then it would by the same token be possible to write down non-aesthetic instructions for how to produce such a desirable quality. Anyone who carefully followed these instructions would end up with an exquisitely balanced painting. And since, by assumption, we could specify sufficient non-aesthetic conditions for all the aesthetic superlatives, we could compile manuals on how to achieve a stunning artistic success. With the same ease with which you prepare a meal by following instructions in a cookery book, you could produce a superlative work of art by following instructions in a *Manual for Artistic Success*.

Clearly, there is something fishy about the idea that one could produce *Guernica* similarly to how one can produce *Gefilte Fish*. The very fact that there are no recipes for artistic success, no aesthetic cookery books for masterpieces, is a pragmatic proof of the claim that positive aesthetic concepts are not governed by rules; for if such manuals were possible they would top the bestseller lists for a long time. In brief: since the negation of the restricted version of Sibley's thesis implies a magic formula, and there are no magic formulas, Sibley's restricted thesis is true.

My second argument goes back to the question of the full description and to the logical schema representing the claim that aesthetic concepts are rule governed.<sup>33</sup> We have already seen that when the antecedent of the general implication contains a full description we do not obtain a law-like generalization, but a description of a particular work with the aesthetic properties it has. The question we should ask is 'What would we get in the consequent when the antecedent does not contain a full description but only a partial one – such as we usually get in the everyday situations referred to by Zemach?' The answer is that we would get a vague characterization of a type, which leaves an infinite number of specific features undetermined. If the list of the non-aesthetic properties were long enough, we would get something

<sup>33</sup> See page 13 above.

akin to a general description of a style or genre within the bounds of which we could imagine indefinitely many specific realizations. But since within every such 'style' or 'genre' we could imagine not only good realizations but also bad and very bad ones (recall the *Mona Lisa* example), no partial description in non-aesthetic terms will ever be sufficient for the correct application of a positive aesthetic evaluative term. In brief: since any generalization based on non-aesthetic properties might give us at best a description of a 'style' and since in any 'style' there could be bad works as well as good ones, positive aesthetic judgements cannot be governed by rules.<sup>34</sup> Sibley's restricted thesis is thus true.

The question one should address now is 'What is the significance of Sibley's thesis, which has thus been doubly restricted?' Does the fact that it does not hold for the descriptive aesthetic concept and for the normative negative ones diminish its importance? I argue that it does not, that its significance as a radical negative thesis with direct implications both for criticism and for the theory of art evaluation has lost none of its bite or urgency. The reason is that neither of the two constraints has any bearing on what we value in art. The fact that we can often state non-aesthetic conditions for descriptive aesthetic concepts (like those denoting styles or genres) contributes nothing (as we saw in the preceding argument) towards explication of aesthetic merit. Nor does the fact that we can sometimes state conditions for negative aesthetic judgements, that is to say, for artistic failures. For what we value in art is its positive values, its great achievements, not the results that are just mediocre or bad. Art enriches our experience through works that work, not through those that do not. We are therefore naturally not as interested in the question of what makes bad works of art bad as in the question of what it is that makes good works of art good. But if Sibley's restricted thesis is true, it seems that we will never have a satisfactory answer to the question 'What are the good-making qualities of good works of art?' It also seems that we will have to accept the conclusion that positive aesthetic judgements such as 'This painting is well balanced' can never be explained or justified. But if this is so, do we really have an answer to the sceptical charge that aesthetic judgements are merely expressions of personal preference?

## VI. COMPARATIVE AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

If we cannot explain or justify *categorical* aesthetic judgements alleging that certain works of art are good, perhaps we can at least establish comparative

<sup>34</sup> I put the word 'style' in inverted commas since I am using it here as a technical term that applies not only to existing styles but also to other value-neutral aesthetic categories for which we may have no names.

judgements asserting that some works are better than others. 'Better than' could be understood as a disjunction of more specific aesthetic comparisons like 'more coherent than', 'more beautiful than', or 'more harmonious than'. If one could justify such judgements, then, since such comparative relations are transitive, no sceptical conclusions about the impossibility of establishing any hierarchy among works of art would follow. Unfortunately, we encounter here an equally serious problem. We have already seen<sup>35</sup> that positive aesthetic qualities are indexical in the sense that every work achieves them by a different combination of its non-aesthetic properties. Calling these properties indexical may be a novel way of labelling them,<sup>36</sup> but the claim that they are work-specific is by no means new. Apart from being implied by Sibley's text, Stuart Hampshire, for example, has already pointed out that 'the canons of success and failure, or perfection and imperfection, are [...] internal to the work itself.'<sup>37</sup> In the same vein Richard Wollheim reminded us: 'The coherence that we look for in a work of art is always relative to the elements that the artist is required to assemble within it'.<sup>38</sup> But if this is the case, how can we compare the success or failure of harmonization in two different works? How can we compare the coherence of the work  $w_1$  with the coherence of  $w_2$ , if 'the elements that the artist is required to assemble' within each of them have absolutely nothing in common? Once we acknowledge that aesthetic qualities are indexical, it becomes unclear on what basis we can justify our comparative aesthetic judgements, or, to put it more bluntly, how such judgements are possible at all. It was again Hampshire who pointed out that since works of art are unique and since they are 'gratuitous' in the sense that they cannot be seen as solutions to a given problem, there is no point in comparing them.<sup>39</sup> He concludes that

<sup>35</sup> See pages 16–18 above.

<sup>36</sup> The purpose of this label is to draw attention to their irreducible uniqueness.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Hampshire, 'Logic and Appreciation', in *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. William Elton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 162.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 141.

<sup>39</sup> Hampshire seems to suggest that when the critic makes a comparative judgement he ceases to be a critic and becomes a moralist instead: 'But a moralist in criticism (and there exist such critics) will always be making unnecessary choices and laying down principles of exclusion, as a moralist must. He will make "value judgments", and a value judgment is essentially a grading of one thing as better than another. If the judgment is an assessment of the particular excellences of works which are very similar, it may be enlightening and useful; but there can be larger comparisons of scale and greatness between things that are in themselves very different. Judgments of this second kind may be taken as practical advice that certain things ought to be read, seen and heard, and the advice must involve some reference to the whole economy of human needs and purposes; but at this point the critic has actually become a moralist, and the argument supporting his recommendation are the subject-matter of ethics.' Hampshire, 'Logic and Appreciation', 168–69.

works of art 'must be seen as they are, individually, and not judged as contestants in a single race called Art or The Novel or Painting'.<sup>40</sup> Having said this, Hampshire, however, softens his radical conclusion that works of art cannot be compared for their aesthetic merits at all. He seems to allow an exception: 'If the judgment is an assessment of a particular excellence of works which are *very similar*, it may be enlightening and useful.'<sup>41</sup> This may be interpreted as the claim that we could informatively compare works that are similar in important and relevant respects. But then one could argue that the preceding sceptical argument is not really very damaging – if it is damaging at all. For if the argument 'Positive aesthetic qualities are indexical and cannot therefore be compared in different works' applied only to dissimilar works, then nothing acceptable to the sceptic would follow.

Consider our earlier examples of the Bellini scene, the Jawlensky portrait, and the Braque still life. It follows from the preceding argument that we cannot compare and grade them with respect to their aesthetic merits. But does it really matter? Is that really something we should consider disturbing? We do not normally ask questions like 'Is Jawlensky's *Portrait of Alexander Sacharoff* more harmonious than Bellini's *Miracle of the True Cross*?' Such question would strike us as silly, just as it would be foolish to ask whether Braque's *Still Life* is better than *Mona Lisa* or, for that matter, more beautiful than Smetana's *Vltava*. Clearly, such comparative questions make sense only if they concern works that we normally compare, that is to say, works that belong to the same categories. For such comparisons to be meaningful, the works would have to be executed in the same period, belong to the same genre, be in the same style, employ the same technique, and so forth. But then the works would, presumably, be similar enough so that the assessment of their relative excellences could be, as Hampshire says, enlightening and useful.

Unfortunately, Hampshire is wrong. One cannot grant an exception even to works that are highly similar. For the argument, which takes us from the uniqueness of aesthetic merits to the impossibility of comparing them in different works applies with equal force to all works of art, irrespective of how similar or dissimilar they are. Consider the following two pictures:

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 168; my emphasis.



Pablo Picasso, *The Bull Leaves the Bull Pen*, Aquatint, 1959



Pablo Picasso, *Dogs Set on the Bull*, Aquatint, 1959

They certainly belong to the same category. Both are executed in the same style, in the same period, by the same artist, on the same subject matter, using the same technique – they even have the same measurements (35.5 x 50 cm). As a matter of fact, one might have difficulty finding works of art more similar than these.<sup>42</sup> Questions like ‘Which of the two pictures is better balanced, more coherent, more harmonious?’ may be difficult to answer, but they are far from silly. Yet, Wollheim’s dictum that ‘the coherence that we look for in a work of art

<sup>42</sup> Unless of course the works were just different versions of each other.



is *always* relative to the elements that the artist is required to assemble within it' obviously applies to these two pictures as well. And it should be clear that even here that the elements and features Picasso had to harmonize in the first picture are *very different* from those he had to balance in the second one, *despite* the overall similarity of the two prints. We should note that this is *necessarily* so, for otherwise the two objects would not be two different works of art. But if this is the case, how can we make such comparative judgements? There seems to be no rational basis for grading even those works of art that are very similar. We have thus ended up with a scandalous, if not paradoxical, conclusion – namely, we cannot make even the comparative judgements that we habitually make. At any rate, we seem to have no rational explanation as to how comparative aesthetic judgements are possible at all.

This is an intolerable situation if one does not want to embrace total scepticism or relativism with respect to aesthetic value judgements. The conclusion of this paper could thus be seen as a challenge: Any theory of art evaluation which assumes or tries to establish that some works of art are better than others, and which purports to show that that aesthetic judgements are not just statements expressing personal likes and dislikes, should show how arguments of the sort presented above can be effectively diffused.

Let me end with a personal note. I believe that aesthetic value judgements (both categorical and comparative) can be justified. I believe they can be justified within a model built on the idea that works of art are evaluated on the basis of comparisons with their own alternatives, alternatives that can be thought of as unrealized possibilities of the work under consideration. Comparisons with aesthetically inferior alternatives will point to positive qualities of the work, while aesthetically superior alternatives will identify its faults.<sup>43</sup> The explanation and elaboration of this idea would, however, take us far beyond the scope of this already long paper. I hope, however, to be able to present such an explanation and elaboration on a future occasion as a sequel to this article.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> I present some aspects of this model in 'Art and Science: An Outline of Popperian Aesthetics', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 29 (1989), and in *Kitsch and Art*, Chapter 2.

<sup>44</sup> I thank Tereza Hadravová and Štěpán Kubalík for valuable criticism of an earlier version of this paper.

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