

# Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind

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## 4

## The Limits of Aesthetic Empiricism

*Fabian Dorsch*

## 4.1 Introduction: Aesthetic Empiricism

No sensible account of aesthetic appreciation can deny that empirical evidence is central to the understanding and appraisal of artworks. This remains true even if empirical access is broadly understood as to comprise not only sensory perception, but also emotional experience and scientific observation, as well as their testimonial dissemination. We have to make use of our senses in order to get to know artworks, including works of literature or conceptual art. We have to pay attention to our feelings in response to artworks in order to assess whether they are moving or tragic. We have to determine the age of artworks and study the circumstances of their production in order to uncover their degree of originality and imaginativeness. And our aesthetic appreciation of art always involves the empirical interaction with concrete entities—even in the case of literature, music, or conceptual art, say. Accordingly, our knowledge of aesthetic properties is invariably empirical in the sense that it is at least partially based on our empirical access to the artworks concerned.

This concession to empirically minded views in aesthetics leaves, however, room for legitimate disagreement about the concrete extent of the epistemic role of empirical evidence in aesthetic appreciation. Roughly speaking, while *aesthetic empiricism* maintains that empirical evidence may—and often does—suffice to provide defeasible justification for our first- or higher-order aesthetic judgements, *aesthetic rationalism* denies this.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, three particular empiricist claims—which differ primarily in the kind of judgement that they take empirical evidence to possess the power to ground—are the subject of controversy:

- (E1) Empirical evidence can be sufficient to defeasibly justify aesthetic judgements (e.g., ‘the painting is beautiful’).

<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic empiricists also sometimes defend the stronger claim that empirical evidence is the canonical or even the sole source of justification. But what they typically have in mind when making this claim is first-personal experience, rather than scientific or otherwise third-personal evidence—see, for instance, Sibley (1965/2001) and Budd (1999) on judgements about aesthetic qualities, or Goldman (1995) and Budd (1996) on judgements about aesthetic values. I object to this stronger empiricist claim in Dorsch (2007) and Dorsch (2014).

- (E2) Empirical evidence can be sufficient to defeasibly justify judgements about the adequacy of our aesthetic judgements (e.g., ‘I am justified in judging that the painting is beautiful’).
- (E3) Empirical evidence can be sufficient to defeasibly justify sceptical judgements about our capacity to form adequate aesthetic judgements (e.g., ‘I am an unreliable critic and should refrain from forming aesthetic judgements’).

In this chapter, I would like to argue that none of these three empiricist claims is true. With respect to (E1), it makes a difference whether the kind of justification concerned is assumed to be non-inferential or inferential. I have elsewhere argued against the idea that perceptual, emotional, and other first-personal experiences can provide non-inferential justification for aesthetic judgements (see Dorsch 2007 and 2014). Accordingly, my present consideration of the non-inferential reading of (E1) is exclusively focused on the possibility of non-inferential justification through third-personal empirical evidence, as it is provided by the natural sciences, the examination of historical sources, or sociological or psychological studies. My arguments against the inferential reading of (E1), as well as against the other two empiricist claims, are largely neutral on whether the empirical evidence concerned is first- or third-personal. But since (E2) and (E3) are generally more plausible if applied to third-personal evidence, my discussion of aesthetic empiricism in this chapter is primarily concentrated on evidence provided by scientific or similar studies.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.2 Grounding Aesthetic Judgements: (E1)

Let us begin with the issue of whether (E1) is true: whether empirical evidence can provide epistemic support for the ascription of aesthetic properties to artworks. In fact, empirical research may lead to the discovery of properties of a certain kind in a direct or in an indirect way.

The empirical detection of properties is *direct* if the empirically gained evidence informs us about their presence without the need to engage in any type of inference or reasoning. For example, we can directly see the colour of material objects, or use instruments to directly measure (i.e., read off) their length or size. With respect to aesthetic appreciation, the idea is that we can see or measure the symmetry of a building, or discover the value of a piece of music by feeling the pleasure that it gives us (see, e.g., Sibley 1965/2001, McDowell 1983, and Kieran 2010). In such cases, the empirical evidence grounds our aesthetic judgements in a non-inferential way.

<sup>2</sup> It has been proposed that there are higher-order epistemic feelings which reflect the good (or bad) epistemic standing of first-order states (see Proust 2008). While I am generally sympathetic to this idea (see Dorsch 2009b and Dorsch 2013), I am not sure whether these feelings can provide justification for the relevant higher-order judgements. In any case, a positive answer would concern the truth of (E2) just for first-personal—but not for third-personal—evidence.

The empirical discernment of properties is *indirect*, on the other hand, if the respective experiments and studies merely enable us to infer their presence by registering features of another kind and by establishing suitable specific principles of inference. Spectrophotometry, for instance, provides us with indirect access to surface colours by directly measuring reflectance profiles and by recording correlations between such profiles and colour experiences (see Hardin 1988, Byrne and Hilbert 2003, and Dorsch 2009a). Applied to aesthetic judgement, the thought is that we can infer the aesthetic value or qualities of artworks on the basis of the empirical discovery of both their non-aesthetic features and the metaphysical connections between the two sets of properties. In such cases, the empirical evidence provides us with inferential justification for our aesthetic judgements.

#### 4.2.1 *Non-inferential grounding*

According to a standard picture, aesthetic values are realized by aesthetic qualities, which are again realized by non-aesthetic properties (see, e.g., Sibley 1965/2001 and 1959/2001, Budd 1999, and Zangwill 2001). On the assumption that realization is transitive, aesthetic values are also realized by the non-aesthetic features. But, due to the hierarchical structure of realization, the realization by non-aesthetic features occurs on a lower level than the realization by aesthetic qualities.

Empirical investigation can certainly disclose in a direct manner many of the non-aesthetic features of aesthetically valuable objects that are relevant for the realization of aesthetic qualities or values. We can use tools to measure the size or age of artworks; learn about the circumstances of their creation, social function, curatorial treatment, or monetary value by reading historical sources that explicitly describe them; detect their underlying *pentimenti* by means of X-ray images, or their imperceptible molecular structure by means of chemical analysis; employ the various brain-imaging methods of the cognitive sciences to record their emotional or other effects on people; or simply observe the normal **reaction** of artworks on people (e.g., whether they enrage them, or move them to tears).

By contrast, whether something is elegant, unified, beautiful, or a masterpiece, say, is not a measurable quantity (see Budd 1999: 303). We cannot discover the gracefulness or aesthetic worth of an artwork by means of chemical analysis, X-ray spectro-microscopy, or other scientific tools. Similarly, we cannot determine the harmony or sublimity of a work by means of financial appraisal or the interpretation of historical documents. In other words, while empirical investigations have developed methods of detecting many of the non-aesthetic features of objects, they generally do not offer the same kind of direct empirical access to aesthetic properties (irrespective of whether they are evaluative or qualitative).

This difference in empirical access is a consequence of the fact that aesthetic properties are generally response-dependent: that is, their instantiation depends not only on the presence of suitable lower-level realizers, but also on how we normally respond to the recognition of those realizers. Objects are red, for instance, because

their reflectance profile is such that, if perceptually registered, causes a specific kind of experience (i.e., a ‘red experience’) in suitable subjects under suitable conditions (see Wright 1994: ch. 3 and Dorsch 2009a). Similarly, objects are harmonious or excellent because their lower-level features, when experientially or otherwise noticed, cause corresponding aesthetic judgements in suitable critics under suitable circumstances (see Hume 1757/2008, Goldman 1995, and Budd 1996). Hence, empirically registering the respective underlying features does not suffice to reveal the colour or aesthetic feature of an object. What is also needed is to inferentially link the two kinds of property.

In addition, direct empirical access to aesthetic properties is also ruled out by the fact that they are typically normative: they are either values, or by default linked to values in such a way as to constitute reasons for evaluation. It is certainly no easy task to specify what the normativity of a feature consists in. But it seems to be a satisfactory minimal characterization to say that normative features are constitutively linked to norms, that is, to principles which may be violated by the entities that are governed by them (see Korsgaard 1997/2008). Bearers of aesthetic value are subject to the norm that they should be aesthetically good rather than aesthetically bad. This is part of what it means to possess some aesthetic value. Equally, subjects responsive to reasons for aesthetic judgements are governed by the norm that they ought to conform to such reasons once they have recognized them. Again, this is part of what it means to be rational. But, in both cases, the respective entities may fail to live up to the normative standards. Artworks may be aesthetically bad and the aesthetic responses of subjects irrational.

Now, empirical investigations are exclusively concerned with principles (such as the strict or *ceteris paribus* laws of physics) that do not allow for their infringement by entities that are governed by them. If a counter-example to an empirical principle is found, then the principle turns out to be false and needs to be revised or given up.<sup>3</sup> Hence, empirical studies are, by their very nature, not in the business of detecting or establishing norms. But this has the consequence that they also cannot register aesthetic values or identify non-evaluative features—such as aesthetic qualities—as reasons for aesthetic evaluation. For, given that values and reasons are constitutively linked to norms, they cannot be discerned independently of the latter or, more generally, of their normative dimension. The only kind of empirical access, that the normative aspect of aesthetic properties need not exclude, is the registration of the presence of aesthetic qualities without their recognition as reasons.

The fact that we cannot decide by empirical means whether a given feature is an aesthetic reason and, if it is, which aesthetic judgement or evaluation it is a reason for leads naturally to the idea that the recognition of which features are rationally relevant, and in which way they are rationally relevant, requires engagement in some form of

<sup>3</sup> Note that not only strict laws but also *ceteris paribus* laws are exceptionless in this sense. The latter merely allow for intervening factors, but not for counter-examples. By contrast, moral laws, say, are not rendered invalid simply because people breach them.

rational response or reasoning. Of course, relevant empirical investigations may reveal to us which features we actually (rightly or wrongly) take to be aesthetic reasons; and I return to this option in section 4.3. Also, they may direct our attention to features of artworks that we were previously unaware of, and which happen to constitute aesthetic reasons. But by doing this, they do not mark them as reason-constituting features. It is still up to us and our rational capacities to recognize them as reasons, and not merely as the features or the realizers of aesthetic properties that they are.

#### 4.2.2 *Inferential Grounding*

The conclusion that empirical evidence cannot provide us with non-inferential justification for aesthetic judgements still leaves open the possibility of the empirical provision of inferential justification for such judgements. This possibility presupposes that we are able to infer the presence of aesthetic properties from the presence of (some of) their non-aesthetic realizers by means of some suitable metaphysical principles or laws linking the aesthetic properties to their underlying realizers.<sup>4</sup> But it also requires that the discovery of both the non-aesthetic features and the metaphysical principles happens by empirical means. Otherwise, the inferential justification provided would not count as empirical, at least not in the interesting sense captured by aesthetic empiricism. This is already reflected in the fact that (E1) maintains that empirical evidence can be *sufficient* for the justification of aesthetic judgements. For empirical evidence suffices to provide inferential justification only if it gives us access not only to the non-aesthetic features that make up the inferential base, but also to the principles of inference that allow us to reason from those non-aesthetic features to the aesthetic properties concerned.

Indeed, if aesthetic empiricism would just require the possibility of empirical knowledge of the non-aesthetic features, it would not be in disagreement with aesthetic rationalism, at least not in any meaningful way. For, as already noted, it is undeniable that empirical investigations can reveal the presence of most (if not all) relevant non-aesthetic features, such as colours, textures, sounds, and so on. Aesthetic rationalism should thus agree with aesthetic empiricism that we enjoy empirical access to the non-aesthetic properties of artworks. But this should not be surprising, given the fact—mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—that aesthetic knowledge is always at least partially based on empirical evidence. What the two views really differ about is, instead, whether empirical evidence can ground our further knowledge that the empirically detected non-aesthetic features constitute the inferential basis for some aesthetic judgements. But recognizing non-aesthetic features as inferential reasons means recognizing them as figuring in the antecedents of relevant principles of inference. As a result, the disagreement between aesthetic empiricism and aesthetic

<sup>4</sup> The following discussion focuses on deductive principles, but the same should be true of principles of induction (e.g., ‘if all seen swans are white, then all swans are white’) and perhaps also principles of abduction (‘what best explains our observations of the planets’ movements is that they move around the sun’).

rationalism ultimately concerns the issue of whether we can acquire, on empirical grounds, knowledge of inferential principles that link non-aesthetic to aesthetic properties. Aesthetic empiricism says yes, aesthetic rationalism says no.

In other words, the disagreement is about the nature of the inferential extension of aesthetic knowledge (if such an extension is possible at all). When we correctly infer the presence of one set of properties from the presence of another set of properties, we extend our knowledge. Prior to the inference, we merely know of the instantiation of one set of properties. Afterwards, we also know of the instantiation of the other. Now, whether this extension of knowledge is empirical depends on the nature of our justification for the inferential move. This justification is, again, a matter of two factors: our justification to reason in accordance with the relevant general pattern of inference (e.g., *modus ponens*); and our justification to use the relevant principle of inference (e.g., that the presence of one set of properties entails, or renders very likely, the presence of the other set of properties). The reasonableness of relying on the general pattern of inferences is not something that can be proven empirically (see Wright 2004 and Ramsey 1926/1931, respectively). Hence, the inferential extension of knowledge is empirical only if our justification for believing the principle of inference is empirical.

Compare the analogous case of the empirical recognition of surface colours. We can empirically test which colour a given surface possesses by measuring its reflectance profile—that is, the physical property that realizes its colour—and establishing and applying the relevant laws of colour science which link such profiles to colours. Reflectance profiles are not identical with colour properties since they are unable to fix all qualitative aspects of colour, such as the location of unique hues (see Allen 2010) or the colour similarities across surface, volume and light colours (see Dorsch 2010a). But they nonetheless count as realizing colours and enable us to predict the latter, given that they determine the hue, brightness, and saturation of surface colours (see Byrne and Hilbert 2003 and Dorsch 2010a). For example, experiments tell us that red surfaces reflect light with a long wavelength to a higher degree than light with a middle or a short wavelength (relative to the band of wavelengths which our eyes are sensitive to; see McCann, McKee, and Taylor 1976: 456 and Hardin 1988). The resulting strict principles of the form ‘if a surface possesses the reflectance profile P, then it possesses colour C’ may then be used to decide the colour of a surface on the basis of its measured reflectance profile. Hence, there is a third-personal empirical alternative to colour experience: we can come to know about the colour of surfaces, not only by looking at them, but also by carrying out experiments in optical physics that register the reflectance profiles of surfaces and discover their correlations to colours (see Dorsch 2014).

The question is now whether something similar might be true of aesthetic properties: whether we can come to know the aesthetic value or qualities of an artwork by measuring its non-aesthetic features and linking them, by means of empirically uncovered metaphysical principles, to certain aesthetic properties. As already acknowledged, empirical investigations can indeed inform us about many of the non-aesthetic features of artworks. So, the applicability of the inferential strategy to the aesthetic case

depends on whether we enjoy suitable empirical access to the metaphysical connections between aesthetic and non-aesthetic features. In the case of colours, the inferential strategy is feasible because reflectance profiles are strictly correlated to colours, and because the colour sciences are able to reveal these correlations. But—with two notable exceptions to be discussed further below—useful metaphysical principles are generally unavailable in the aesthetic case, especially if they are meant to be established empirically and to capture correlations between aesthetic properties and underlying non-aesthetic features that are open to empirical discernment. Hence, while we can normally deduce the colour of a surface from its other features (e.g., its reflectance profile), we typically cannot do the same with the unity or beauty of an artwork.

#### 4.2.3 *The unavailability of aesthetic principles*

The main reason for the general lack of useful aesthetic principles linking aesthetic to non-aesthetic features is that—with the two exceptions already mentioned—the antecedents of the available aesthetic principles are too specific for the principles to be meaningfully employed in the appreciation of artworks. Indeed, there are three different factors that are responsible for the specificity of the antecedents of aesthetic principles.

The first factor is *aesthetic holism*: the fact that whether, and how, a feature contributes to the realization of an aesthetic property depends on which other features are present.

Aesthetic holism becomes apparent in the fact that both aesthetic and non-aesthetic lower-level features may vary in their contribution to the higher-level aesthetic properties of their bearers. For example, while many works constitute successful art partly in virtue of including elegant elements (e.g., drawings by Matisse), others may to some extent be aesthetic failures precisely because of their involvement of elegance (e.g., to use Dickie's (2004: 412) example, a rustic play in which some of the lines or dresses of the characters are too elegant). Similarly, the tragic intensity of an artwork may contribute negatively to its aesthetic value if it is (unintentionally) combined with comic elements—even if this requires the nullification or reversal of an otherwise positive impact of tragic intensity (see Sibley 1983/2001, as well as the discussion of default merits and defects in section 4.2.4).

The best explanation of this variability is that the contribution of a particular aesthetic or non-aesthetic feature to some higher-level aesthetic property depends in part on the other aesthetically relevant features of the object in question. That is, the realization of a given aesthetic property is a matter not only of the mere sum of the relevant lower-level properties, but also of their complex interactions with each other. However, aesthetic holism has the consequence that the antecedents of aesthetic principles—whether linking non-aesthetic to aesthetic properties or aesthetic qualities to aesthetic values—have to be very specific by mentioning (almost) all respective lower-level properties of the artwork.

The second factor is that aesthetic properties depend on *determinate* non-aesthetic features, such as most specific shapes, colours, sequences of words, cultural contexts, and so on. A slight change in the curvature of the shape of a vase, for instance, may undermine its elegance and, as a result, also its beauty. As Sibley has noted, this is why we can at best get principles of the form ‘if a vase possesses this most specific shape, then it is elegant and beautiful’, but not principles of the form ‘if a vase possesses a determinable shape that this most specific shape is a determination of, then it is elegant and beautiful.’<sup>5</sup>

Malcolm Budd has rightly pointed out that not all minute alterations in determinate non-aesthetic properties lead to an alteration in aesthetic quality or value.<sup>6</sup> But this undermines Sibley’s argument only if the effectual and the non-effectual changes bring about determinations of different determinables—which is not guaranteed to be often the case. For Sibley’s point is that there can be an aesthetic principle connecting a determinable non-aesthetic property to an aesthetic value only if *all* determinations of that determinable are linked to that value. Hence, his opponents have to ensure that all slight changes that lead to the exemplification of a different value, also lead to the instantiation of a different determinable. Sibley’s example is precisely meant to question the viability of this strong thesis.

The third factor is that at least some instantiations of aesthetic value depend on the numerical identity of the event of creation concerned, which again depends on the numerical identity of the involved artist, point of time, and so on. This happens, for instance, in cases where the particularity of artistic expression is aesthetically relevant. Artworks may not only be expressive of perspectives on the world, that is, represent the values, emotions, and opinions of (real or fictional) persons or characters. They are also always expressions of the skills of the respective artist—of his or her insight, inventiveness, wit, sensibility, unoriginality, or dilettantism. Part of why we value artworks is that they are expressive of the specific artistic skills and virtues of a particular artist at a given time (see McGonigal 2010 and Kieran 2010). Even if I happen by chance to come up with a simple line drawing that resembles those made by Matisse, my drawing will be of lesser aesthetic value, given that it is a fortuitous achievement, rather than a manifestation of artistic mastery. But artistic expression is, again, partly a matter of the particularity of the artist and his or her act of expression, given that it is an instance of the genuine expression of a particular person’s personal features (e.g., traits, skills, or thoughts).<sup>7</sup> For instance, it matters for the aesthetic value of a given Cubistic painting

<sup>5</sup> See Sibley (1959/2001) and (1974/2001). It is no counter-example to this claim that, say, Hamlet would remain eloquent and a masterpiece even if whole scenes were missing. For it would be an eloquent masterpiece of a different kind, with a different aesthetic value realized by different aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties.

<sup>6</sup> See Budd (1999: 302–3). Note that Budd is not opposing Sibley’s conclusion, but just his argument for that conclusion. Indeed, he accepts Sibley’s observations about aesthetic principles (see Budd 1999: 301), but does not offer his own reasons for doing so.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, McDowell (1982). In particular, genuine expression is factive: it is expressive of something existing or obtaining. Facial expression and much of linguistic expression are also genuine in this

whether it was made in Céret in 1911 and, if so, whether it was created by Braque or by Picasso. Hence, the relevant aesthetic principles have to mention particular individuals in their antecedents.

The noted specificity of the antecedents of aesthetic principles—that is, their involvement of a large number of very determinate properties and possibly also of some individuals—has three important consequences.

First, aesthetic principles are largely inapplicable: there are at best a few objects that actually satisfy their antecedents. Possible examples are paintings which are almost identical in their physical, representational, and historical properties—such as the various paintings with exactly the same subject matter produced by the Brueghel workshop. However, the physical objects concerned can count as satisfying the same aesthetic principle only if they are assumed to constitute distinct artworks. But perhaps such serially (though manually) produced objects should be treated more like prints in that they are all copies of one and the same repeatable artwork (see Currie 1989).

Second, aesthetic principles are practically unspecifiable: the number of the relevant non-aesthetic features or aesthetic qualities is just too large, and the non-aesthetic properties are also often too specific, to allow for their precise and exhaustive description. Just consider the task of describing the exact configuration of colours and shapes on particular paintings by Monet or Kandinsky.

Third, aesthetic principles are mostly uninformative: they do not go beyond expressing a very general supervenience claim. There are at least two dimensions to this unformativity of specific aesthetic principles. On the one hand, they do not pick out any recognizable and describable pattern among the various sets of features that realize one and the same aesthetic property. There are different ways in which artworks may be graceful or sublime. But, due to their specificity, the corresponding principles do not manage to identify any similarities between those ways (see Jackson, Pettit, and Smith 2004). On the other hand, the specific aesthetic principles under consideration do not discriminate between the features that are highly relevant and those that are hardly relevant for the aesthetic properties mentioned in the consequent. For instance, they treat the dimensions of a canvas on a par with the texture of the paint brushes or the shapes of drawn lines, although the weight and significance of their contribution to the realization or the explanation of aesthetic properties may differ greatly. Indeed, the principles at issue may very well cite non-aesthetic properties or aesthetic qualities that are, with respect to the particular artwork in question, not at all aesthetically relevant as realizers or reasons.

Because of the restrictions on our capacity to formulate highly specific principles, it is questionable whether we really enjoy access to very many aesthetic principles

sense. The factive expression of artistic skills has, however, to be distinguished from other, non-factive forms of expression involved in art, such as the expression of emotions through music, or the expression of a character's state of mind by an actor.

that capture the metaphysical connections between aesthetic and non-aesthetic features. Furthermore, even if it is possible for us to describe some such correlations in law-like terms, it is natural to doubt whether they should count as genuine principles, on account of the limitations to their generality, applicability, and informativity. At least, they are not the kind of principles, the availability and usefulness of which is at issue in the debate between generalists and particularists (see Jackson, Pettit, and Smith 2004). This is reflected by the fact that very complex and determinate aesthetic principles play no notable role in actual instances of aesthetic criticism. Accordingly, even if empirical investigations succeed in discovering something like highly specific aesthetic principles, this should not count as a substantial contribution to criticism. In particular, these principles cannot in practice be used to infer aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic ones.

#### 4.2.4 *Conceptual and default principles*

However, as noted above, there are two kinds of aesthetic principle that are relatively general and, as a result, relevant and useful for aesthetic criticism. But while they allow for the justification of aesthetic judgements by means of principled inferences, these principles are not empirically accessible.

Exceptions of the first kind—so-called *conceptual principles*—arise because of certain logical connections between evaluative and non-evaluative concepts, which generate corresponding and conceptually true principles. Arguably, that something is symmetrical logically implies that it is balanced: that is, it is inconceivable that something symmetrical is imbalanced, in the same sense in which it is inconceivable that a bachelor is married. Accordingly, since we can scientifically measure whether something (e.g., a face or a building) is symmetrical, we have also indirect access to the aesthetic quality of being balanced and—given that this property is by default linked to a positive aesthetic value—perhaps also to some instances of aesthetic worth.

Conceptual principles are very limited in number, however. Indeed, not many other examples come easily to mind. Perhaps being original—in the sense of being the first—is another aesthetic quality that is logically entailed by some measurable non-aesthetic feature, namely position in time relative to other artworks. More important, such conceptual principles are irrelevant for the issue under consideration, given that we know them *a priori* and not *a posteriori*. Of course, we may test our various conceptual intuitions and the extent to which they are commonly accepted—but not which of them are indeed adequate and do track conceptual necessities. The main reason for this is that the conditions on conceptual competence are of a normative nature and thus resist empirical specification (see Kripke 1982 and Hale 1997).<sup>8</sup> Because of their conceptual truth, principles of the kind at issue are therefore not open to empirical discovery.

<sup>8</sup> Even some of the strongest defenders of experimental methods in philosophy acknowledge that such methods are not—and should not be—aimed at discovering conceptual links (see Knobe and Nichols

The second exceptional class consists of what may be labelled *default principles*: that is, principles that capture the positive or negative default contribution of certain features to aesthetic value. It is important to note that aesthetic holism does not prevent aesthetic qualities from being default merits or defects.<sup>9</sup> For instance, being balanced or being graceful contribute, by default, positively to their bearer's aesthetic worth; while being garish or being sentimental have, by default, the opposite effect. It is open to debate what it means exactly that certain features are by default merit- or defect-constituting properties (see, e.g., Bergqvist 2010). But the default character of the property of being balanced, say, becomes manifest in the fact that judgements like 'it is beautiful because it is balanced' need no further epistemic justification or metaphysical explanation, while judgements like 'it is ugly because it is balanced' do if they are not to remain unintelligible (see Sibley 1983/2001: 106, Bergqvist 2010: 11, and Kirwin 2011: 209).<sup>10</sup>

However, the role of empirical investigations in the establishment of default principles—principles like 'something elegant is, by default, beautiful' or 'tragic intensity constitutes, by default, an aesthetic merit'—is, again, very limited. Neither the obtaining of their antecedents nor that of their consequents can be established directly by scientific means, given that aesthetic properties are not open to non-inferential empirical access. Equally, it is not possible to empirically decide which features are default merits or default defects, and which not. It might be proposed that we can find out whether a certain feature is a default merit by noting that ascriptions of that feature are more often than not followed by a positive evaluation. But empirical investigations do not have the resources to tell which of the recorded responses are in fact adequate and which should instead be discounted as flawed (see the discussion in section 4.3). However, if empirical studies cannot distinguish adequate from flawed aesthetic responses, they cannot use their results to determine whether certain features are, indeed, default merits or defects.

Moreover, even if it were somehow possible to empirically discern the adequacy of expressed aesthetic opinions, this would not help much with the establishment of default principles, mainly because of two problems related to aesthetic holism.

The first problem is that aesthetic qualities are hardly ever so isolated in their occurrence that they contribute to aesthetic value independently of the influence of other

2008: section 1). The same conclusion can also be found in the more rationalist approaches of Bealer (2002) and Chalmers (2002).

<sup>9</sup> I borrow this terminology from Bergqvist (2010), who in turn has borrowed it from Dancy (2004). Other writers talk of 'inherent' or 'prima facie' merits and defects (see Sibley 1983/2001, Budd 1999, and Bender 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this fact is best explained in terms of the idea that it is distinctive of default merits that they are able to make a positive contribution to aesthetic value without the help of other features, while they need such help when making a negative contribution, or no contribution at all (Bergqvist 2010: 11). This idea would also be able to capture the further idea that default merits give rise to a positive value when occurring in isolation or, more realistically, in the absence of any interference by other features (see Bergqvist 2010 for critical discussion); as well as the idea that default merits render it perhaps more probable than not that their bearers are of positive aesthetic worth.

aesthetic qualities. But if there are almost no actual manifestations of default contribution, they cannot be properly studied by empirical means. If empirical studies could, after all, show that the large majority of elegant artworks are in fact beautiful, say, this would not mean that elegance is a default merit, but at best that various combinations of elegance with other aesthetic qualities—which, moreover, need not be the same in each case—lead to a positive aesthetic value.

The second problem is that, even if there were many instances of default contributions to aesthetic value by a single aesthetic quality, empirical findings should not be expected to be able to distinguish them from cases in which several aesthetic qualities together determine the aesthetic value of the artwork concerned. The reason for this is that empirical research typically cannot reveal, with respect to particular artworks, to which extent each of its aesthetic qualities is involved in the realization of aesthetic value. And this is, again, due to the fact that their aesthetic relevance is a matter of their concrete interaction with each other in each of the examples.

#### 4.2.5 *Outlook*

The preceding considerations have shown that (E1) is false because empirical evidence can justify aesthetic judgements neither non-inferentially, nor inferentially. In particular, empirical evidence cannot be used to establish principles of inference with sufficient generality that entitle us to infer aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic ones, given that such principles concern either conceptual truths or default contributions to aesthetic value, neither of which is open to empirical detection.

By contrast, all empirically based aesthetic principles are so specific that they remain uninformative with respect to particular aesthetic properties and cannot be applied to more than a few instances of aesthetic qualities—if the principles can be formulated in the first place. As a result, they are not the kind of principles that may be used to infer the aesthetic properties of artworks on the basis of their non-aesthetic features. So, at best, empirical studies may inform us about some non-aesthetic features, which we then recognize to be rationally relevant within the context of non-deductive and largely unprincipled aesthetic reasoning.

But empirical insight might still serve in a different epistemic function with respect to aesthetic appreciation. Instead of informing us about the nature of artworks and similar objects, it may instead inform us about our own aesthetic responses. More specifically, it may speak for or against the epistemic adequacy of specific aesthetic judgements; or it may speak for or against our general trustworthiness as aesthetic judges. While the first option concerns the truth of (E2), the second concerns the truth of (E3). I discuss each of them in turn.

### 4.3 Grounding Higher-Order Judgements of Adequacy: (E2)

With respect to (E2), the central idea is that there is perhaps an even more indirect way in which empirical investigations might be able to identify the aesthetic values

or reason-constituting aesthetic qualities of artworks, or disclose which features of artworks constitute default merits or defects. Consider, again, the analogous case of surface colour. Our empirical access to them need not involve any investigation of the properties of the surface concerned. Instead, we may simply study the colour responses of a suitably large number of subjects—for instance, by showing them sample objects and recording their colour judgements, or scanning the relevant areas of their brains. In this way, without ever having to look at the objects or otherwise examine them, we may be able to come to know their surface colours. Similarly, art historians and cognitive scientists may try to identify the aesthetic properties of an artwork by gaining insight into the aesthetic opinions of people, or their tendencies to form certain aesthetic judgements. Artists, critics, curators, and patrons have expressed their assessments and preferences in interviews, letters, diaries, and so on, that are open to interpretative study; while psychological research may test how people are inclined to react evaluatively to given artworks.

However, such investigations disclose what people believe or value, and not what is true or valuable. The recognition of the actual properties of the objects in question requires also the ability to tell which of the registered judgements (and other forms of expression of opinion) are adequate. Part of the reason for this is that the presence of real property instances—even if they concern response-dependent properties—is not a matter of the statistical distribution of responses. Even a large number or majority of subjects may err about the colours or aesthetic properties of objects (see Wright 1994: ch. 3, appendix). This is all the more true in the aesthetic case, given that aesthetic appreciation requires a sophisticated form of sensitivity and responsiveness which, moreover, is not innate, but needs considerable training (see Kant 1790/2009 and Sibley 1959/2001). The violent expressions of anger and disgust towards Stravinsky's *Sacre de Printemps* at its Parisian premiere, say, are a case in point: many members of the audience were simply not (yet) able to appreciate the work for what it is.

There are basically two ways in which we might empirically test the adequacy of aesthetic judgements.

The first alternative is to try to reproduce the opinions concerned by independent means, notably by scrutinizing the underlying features of the artwork in question and determining their contribution to aesthetic worth. The idea is that the original opinions to be assessed are adequate just in case they match the independently formed judgements. But, as the considerations in section 4.2 have shown, empirical findings cannot really provide this kind of access to aesthetic properties.

The second way is to investigate the conditions under which the recorded judgements have actually been formed. The thought is that sufficiently normal or suitable conditions indicate adequacy of opinion and insufficiently normal or suitable conditions inadequacy of opinion (again, especially, though not exclusively, if the properties concerned are response-dependent). The pursuit of this strategy requires us, minimally, when faced with disagreeing judgements, to determine which of them are at fault.

In the case of colours, this means simply checking the illumination conditions and the state of mind—and, especially, of the visual system—of the persons concerned. If a colour judgement is formed under coloured or insufficiently bright lighting, or by a subject who is detected to be colour blind or wearing tinted glasses, then it should not be considered as representing the true colour of the object concerned. Given that we have empirical access to whether normal or suitable conditions for colour perception obtain, we can typically find out, on the basis of empirical evidence, whether given colour judgements are adequate or not. Similar considerations are likely to apply to most other non-aesthetic features of artworks.

In the case of aesthetic qualities and, especially, values, the situation is more complicated. The recognition of aesthetic properties is (nearly) always facilitated by the recognition of the underlying non-aesthetic features. For this reason, a person with impaired vision is not in a good position to recognize the aesthetic properties of paintings; and a blind person, in no such position at all. Hence, aesthetic judgements can be inadequate simply because they are based on inadequate non-aesthetic judgements. But since we can empirically discover the presence of judgements of the latter kind, we also enjoy indirect empirical access to the inadequacy of some aesthetic judgements, namely those which fail to be grounded in the proper recognition of the relevant non-aesthetic features of the artwork at issue. By empirically finding out that someone is visually impaired or blind (and does not use prosthetic tools), we can disqualify his or her aesthetic judgements about visual art from the start.<sup>11</sup>

For our current purposes, these cases are not of great interest, however, since they concern the adequacy of *non-aesthetic* judgements, and only very indirectly that of *aesthetic* judgements. What we should look at instead are the normal or suitable conditions for the transition from the recognition of non-aesthetic features to the judgemental ascription of aesthetic properties. Even assuming that the subject has no problems perceiving or otherwise discerning the non-aesthetic features of an artwork, there are many ways—especially concerning the subject's cognitive and evaluative capacities—in which the conditions may fail to be normal or suitable for aesthetic judgement. Among other things, the subject may be partial or unsuitably influenced by non-aesthetic evaluations, lack sufficient experience with or knowledge of art, or be insensitive to which properties of artworks constitute aesthetic defects or merits or are otherwise aesthetically relevant (see Hume 1757/2008 and Goldman 1995).

The problem with this strategy is, however, that empirical investigations do not have the resources to recognize these possible sources of error for what they are. Empirical studies may inform us about the personal or subpersonal factors that influence our

<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous referees for pointing out this option. Note, however, there is still the issue of whether the fact that the proper aesthetic appreciation of paintings, say, requires access to their visible properties, and not to their tactile or olfactory properties, is empirically accessible. This would be the case if facts like these are due to conventions. But if they are instead due to the fact that looking at paintings provides us with an aesthetically more valuable experience than touching or smelling them, they would resist empirical detection, at least in a third-personal way.

aesthetic judgements over and above our experience and understanding of the artworks in question (see section 4.4). They may also determine the scope of our past exposure to and expertise in art. And they may tell us which aesthetic or non-aesthetic properties of artworks we take to contribute to aesthetic worth in a positive or negative way. But they cannot help us to decide whether any of these facts indicates the actual occurrence of an error in judgement. That is, empirical evidence may enable us to correctly describe the actual conditions under which we form our aesthetic judgements, but not to settle the issue of whether these conditions fail to be normal or suitable in any respect.

To start with, that we do not identify certain features as aesthetically relevant (or irrelevant) does not entail that we should have identified them as such. For the latter issue depends on which features are in fact realizers of aesthetic value and, relatedly, reasons for aesthetic evaluation. But which aesthetic contribution a given feature has as a realizer or reason is a matter both of its default tendency and of its interaction with the other aesthetically relevant features. And, as argued above, empirical investigations cannot reveal which features are realizers or reasons, or in which way and to which extent they contribute to a particular instance of aesthetic value. Accordingly, whether a subject is mistaken about the positive or negative aesthetic contribution of a given feature is not open to empirical study.

Similarly, whether a subject is lacking in experience or knowledge depends on which features and interactions need to be recognized. While the recognition of the aesthetic relevance of some features may not presuppose much prior engagement with art, other cases may require extensive expertise to be properly identified and understood. Hence, the determination of whether a critic is sufficiently equipped to form a proper aesthetic judgement of a given artwork requires, again, the prior determination of which features of the artwork are aesthetically relevant as realizers or reasons—a task for which there are, as shown above, no empirical means.

The same line of reasoning applies to the issue of adjudging whether empirically detected influences on our aesthetic judgements are unproblematic from an aesthetic point of view, or whether they instead give rise to undue biases. We can acquire empirical evidence for the presence of such influences, but not for the beneficial, neutral, or detrimental nature of their impact on aesthetic appreciation. As a result, while empirical evidence may tell us how we respond aesthetically to artworks, it cannot tell us which of our aesthetic judgements are adequate, and which not. (E2) should therefore be rejected.

#### 4.4 Grounding Aesthetic Scepticism: (E3)

The conclusion so far has been that third-personal empirical evidence is generally unable to justify both first-order and higher-order aesthetic judgements. It cannot serve as non-inferential or inferential ground of the former; and it cannot distinguish between

adequate and inadequate instances of the latter. But there is still the possibility that empirical evidence may be able to cast doubt on our general trustworthiness as aesthetic critics—in particular, if aesthetic rationalism should indeed be assumed to be the best account of aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, recent psychological studies have shown that we are often much more irrational in our aesthetic responses than we think, and that we let ourselves be influenced in our aesthetic judgements by factors that should not really play a role in aesthetic appreciation, at least not according to aesthetic rationalism.

In what follows, I discuss whether these empirical results suffice to establish some form of scepticism about our capacity for aesthetic judgement—that is, whether they require us to refrain from forming aesthetic judgements. A positive answer would be tantamount to the truth of (E<sub>3</sub>). More specifically, I consider two forms of aesthetic scepticism that are modelled, respectively, on the example of fake barn country and on the problem of pessimistic induction (and, in a footnote, mention a third modelled on Cartesian scepticism about perceptual belief).

#### 4.4.1 *Kieran's Sceptical Challenge*

My starting point is the sceptical challenge for traditional accounts of aesthetic appreciation (including aesthetic rationalism) that Matthew Kieran raised in a recent article:

The challenge which snobbery poses to aesthetic justification and knowledge-claims is fundamental. It seems that if we are judging or responding snobbishly, then we lack internal justification for aesthetic claims, and we are not in a legitimate position to claim aesthetic knowledge. Furthermore, in the aesthetic realm snobbery is pervasive, much more so than we tend to presume, and moreover it is very difficult for us to tell whether we or others are being snobbish. The conjunction of these propositions gives rise to the following claim: for any given aesthetic response or judgement, we do not know whether it is justified, nor whether we can legitimately claim that things are as it lays down. If this is the epistemic situation we are in, the reasonable course of action seems to be to withdraw aesthetic claims. (Kieran 2010: 10)

In this passage, as well as in most parts of his article, Kieran concentrates on aesthetic responses that are biased due to snobbery—that is, due to the typically unacknowledged desire to appear or feel superior relative to a certain group of people. But his considerations and conclusion apply equally well to aesthetic judgements that are biased for reasons other than snobbery, such as subconscious framing or exposure effects. It is therefore possible to abstract from the specific case of snobbery and consider the epistemological consequences of biased aesthetic judgements more generally. Of most interest are thereby judgements that are unduly biased in virtue of some subpersonal factors, such that their bias cannot be discovered by means of introspection or normal observation of behaviour. Kieran identifies three crucial features of such judgements:

- (i) They lack justification and do not constitute knowledge.
- (ii) They are, on the personal level, indistinguishable from unbiased aesthetic judgements (because the kind of bias concerned is due to subpersonal factors).
- (iii) They are actually ubiquitous (i.e., high in number among all aesthetic judgements).

Empirical studies are important with respect to aesthetic appreciation in so far as they make us aware of the features (ii) and (iii) and, hence, of the pervasiveness of undue biases that are inaccessible on the personal level. On the one hand, they inform us that there actually are aesthetic judgements that are biased in virtue of some subpersonal influences. And, on the other hand, they tell us that the number of such judgements is in fact relatively high in comparison with the total number of aesthetic judgements made. Even the aesthetic verdicts of experts have been shown not to be immune to the unnoticed distorting influence of aesthetically irrelevant factors, such as financial value or social standing (see, e.g., Brochet 2001; see also Cutting 2006). Indeed, without empirical research, these distortions of our opinions would largely remain unknown to us. We cannot find out by means of introspection or by listening to other people whether our or their aesthetic views involve cognitive biases due to the sub-conscious influence of aesthetically irrelevant factors. This is why—to repeat a phrase from Kieran’s quote—‘it is very difficult for us to tell whether we or others are [biased]’ in aesthetic judgements: knowledge of such biases is often unattainable without proper scientific investigation.

Now, Kieran’s main suggestion in the quoted passage is that the three features (i)–(iii) taken together give rise to the sceptical conclusion that we should withhold aesthetic judgement.<sup>12</sup> The central thought is that we should refrain from judgements of a certain kind if a high number of judgements concerned actually lack good epistemic standing. This is, for instance, what would arguably be the case if we were to move to fake barn country. Because of the high number of fakes, we would unlearn how to visually discriminate genuine barns and would thus lose our capacity to form justified and knowledgeable perceptual judgements about the presence of such barns. As a consequence, we should stop forming the judgement that there is a real barn whenever it visually seems to us as if there is one present in our environment—at least as long as we remain in fake barn country.

The starting point of the parallel sceptical argument in the aesthetic case is the assumption that our circumstances are such that many of our aesthetic responses end

<sup>12</sup> The sceptical conclusion may also be supported in a different way, which relies solely on features (i) and (ii), but makes the further assumption that if we are unable to assure ourselves or others of the good epistemic standing of judgements of a certain kind, we are required to refrain from forming or trusting those judgements. What (i) and (ii) imply is that we cannot distinguish epistemically bad (i.e., biased) from epistemically good (i.e., unbiased) aesthetic judgements, at least on the personal level. But if we are unable to tell whether aesthetic judgements are of good or bad epistemic standing, we should better distrust them (unless we have, in particular cases, subpersonal evidence for the absence of any relevant bias). However, this Cartesian-style argument fails because the indistinguishability relation involved in feature (ii) is asymmetric: that we mistake biased judgements for unbiased ones does not mean that we mistake unbiased judgements for biased ones—we take both to be unbiased and, hence, to be justified or even instances of knowledge (see, e.g., McDowell 1986, Williamson 1990, Martin 2006, Dorsch 2010b, and Dorsch 2013). Accordingly, the sceptic is wrong about the extension of the sceptical conclusion from biased to unbiased aesthetic judgements: our inability to distinguish unbiased aesthetic judgements from biased ones does not entail that we cannot recognize the unbiased judgements for what they are. But, without this extension, the sceptical conclusion would remain completely uninteresting, given that it is trivially true that we should

up being distorted by factors external to conscious experience (such as framing effects or subconsciously effective desires), while only a few remain unaffected and adequate. Just like in the example of fake barn country, we arguably lose our ability to recognize aesthetic qualities and values under these conditions, even in cases where our aesthetic judgements are actually unbiased. We may still veridically take objects to have certain aesthetic properties, but our resulting beliefs that they possess those properties remain unjustified because their truth is too accidental—it is pure luck that our responses are unbiased and not skewed by aesthetically irrelevant factors. As a consequence, we should cease to form aesthetic judgements—at least once we have become aware of the omnipresence of the distortions. In short, given that we seem to end up with biased aesthetic opinions much more often than not, we ~~should~~ better stop coming up with such opinions in the first place.

Perhaps this description of our epistemic situation is too pessimistic, and perhaps the empirical results do not really support the rather strong claim that only a few of our aesthetic judgements are unbiased. There are difficult issues here concerning how frequently, and in which actual or counterfactual circumstances, we have to be wrong in order to count as unreliable judges. But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the description provided is indeed accurate and can be backed up empirically. Even then, our epistemic situation does not suffice to warrant the adoption of the kind of scepticism about aesthetic judgements outlined, at least not in the long run. It is true that we should hold back momentarily from making aesthetic judgements, as long as most of our responses are bound to be distorted. But we can certainly reduce the number of our biased aesthetic judgements and thus regain our ability to recognize aesthetic properties to a considerable extent—just as we may start to look at what seem to be barns from different angles and thereby regain our capacity to visually tell apart genuine barns from fake ones.

Once we are aware of the fact, say, that we tend to value artworks more the more we are confronted with them, we can actively counter this effect—for instance, by increasing and balancing our exposure to the different artworks that we want to assess or compare.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, once we realize that we are aesthetic snobs, we can actively go against our tendency to care about our social status when appreciating art—for instance, by learning, or forcing ourselves, to ignore our social status, or what others think about us; or by making a point of giving weight and expression to unpopular opinions. So, by means of careful actions, we may be able to ensure that our aesthetic judgements

avoid forming biased aesthetic judgements. In any case, Kieran does not endorse this way of arguing for the sceptical conclusion, as illustrated by his insistence on the importance of feature (iii), that is, the prevalence of bias in aesthetic matters.

<sup>13</sup> This might not work if there were no upper limit to the exposure effect, or if high exposure would systematically lead to too high an evaluation. But there is yet no reason to assume that, if we just look long enough at our own drawings, we will eventually find them to be better than Matisse's; or that spending years in a room with a reproduction of some mediocre painting will lead us to overestimate the aesthetic value of the original.

are unbiased more of the time than not. Our opinions would perhaps continue to be subject to the subconscious force of the aesthetically irrelevant external factors. But there is no reason to assume that this force cannot be neutralized or outweighed by the impact of our actions.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.4.2 *Pessimistic induction*

The sceptic might still insist that we should be rather pessimistic about our ability to do better in the future. Our aesthetic judgements were largely distorted in the past; they are still so in the present; so how could we seriously expect them to improve in the future? This piece of reasoning resembles the so-called *pessimistic (meta-)induction* in the philosophy of science (see, e.g., Chakravartty 2007: ch. 2.4, Psillos 1996, and Doppelt 2007). The history of science consists of a long and ordered sequence of theories, each of which has been empirically refuted at a certain moment in time and been replaced by a successor theory. So how could we hope that the currently endorsed theories—that is, those theories at the end of the series that have not yet been disproven—will fare any better than any of their predecessors? Enumerative induction seems to show that all human attempts at formulating a correct scientific theory are destined to fail—which is why we perhaps should stop taking any of our scientific theories to be (approximately) true (which need not mean, however, that we should also stop making practical use of them). Perhaps something similar is true of our attempts at forming aesthetic judgements?

But the answer should be negative. Apart from general objections to the soundness of pessimistic induction arguments (Chakravartty 2007: ch. 2.4; Psillos 1996; Doppelt 2007), this sceptical strategy does not really apply to the aesthetic case, given that we have no evidence that *all* of our aesthetic judgements so far have been biased. But, with some of them having been unbiased, there is no inductive basis to infer that our future aesthetic judgements will be biased. Indeed, we can expect our aesthetic judgements to improve in the future precisely because we already start off with a (small) basis of adequate aesthetic judgements and, furthermore, because we have gained knowledge about some of the distorting factors and are able to use this knowledge in order to counter their negative influence.

#### 4.4.3 *The social dimension of aesthetic appreciation*

To conclude, neither of the sceptical challenges is successful in its attempt to establish the conclusion that we should refrain from forming aesthetic judgements. There is therefore no good reason to accept (E<sub>3</sub>). Perhaps future evidence will show that we

<sup>14</sup> This proposal is perfectly compatible with the kind of aesthetic virtue theory defended by Kieran (2010). Indeed, it may actually be aesthetically virtuous to try to counter the hidden biases of one's aesthetic judgements. Moreover, aesthetic rationalism can certainly be combined with such a virtue-theoretical approach, given that our capacity to discriminate and respond to reasons may very well be a matter of virtue and character (see McDowell 1979).

cannot fail to be biased when forming aesthetic judgements and that there is no room at all for improvement in this matter. But as long as this is not the case, (E<sub>3</sub>) should be rejected—even in the light of empirical tests indicating that bias in aesthetic judgements is indeed widespread. Nonetheless, the comparison with the case of science is instructive in two respects.

First, it shows that there need not be anything wrong epistemically or pragmatically in continuing to form judgements of a certain kind, despite knowing that many—or even all—past instances of that kind have been deficient in one way or another. Just as there are good reasons to think that the pessimistic induction does not force us to refrain from believing in new and not yet falsified scientific theories, there are good reasons to think that the empirically detected pervasiveness of bias does not force us to refrain from acquiring aesthetic beliefs.

Second, the comparison demonstrates that our first-personal evidence is not the only kind of evidence that may require us to question or correct our aesthetic judgements: the third-personal evidence delivered by the sciences may play this role as well. Although such third-personal evidence cannot tell us which aesthetic properties to ascribe to which objects, or which of our aesthetic responses are adequate, it can inform us about the presence of undue biases. In a similar vein, the differing aesthetic opinions of others, who are generally trustworthy critics and not obviously at fault in the particular cases concerned, give us reason to critically return to our own views. As a consequence, the still widely held view that our own first-personal experience enjoys special authority for us in aesthetic matters (see, e.g., Budd 1996: ch. 1, Hopkins 2010, and Kieran 2010) comes under threat: this authority may very well be undermined in particular instances by third-personal evidence, or by testimonially transmitted first-personal evidence.

What this second point furthermore suggests is that aesthetic criticism should be understood as a genuinely social endeavour, not dissimilar to that of the sciences. Just as scientists depend on their interaction with each other to progress with their theories, the best critics are those who aim to improve their aesthetic judgements partly in response to evidence that is not first-personal, or not their own. This is, for instance, why we should take into account, when assessing the value of an artwork, the testimony of others, as well as how it was treated in the past. In particular, that an artwork has survived the so-called ‘test of time’ may be a good reason for ascribing a high aesthetic value to it (see Hume 1757/2008 and Savile 1982).

At this point, it should be noted that whether an artwork satisfies this test cannot be decided empirically. As Savile has convincingly argued, a given artwork should count as having survived the test of time ‘if over a sufficiently long period it survives in our attention under an appropriate interpretation in a sufficiently embedded way’ (Savile 1982: 259; see also Hume 1757/2008). Accordingly, what matters is not mere survival, but whether the work in question (or a copy of it) has survived in virtue of the aesthetic appreciation of sufficiently experienced critics with an adequate understanding of the work. But, for the reasons given earlier, we cannot determine the adequacy

of experience and understanding involved in (past or present) aesthetic opinions by empirical means. Since even a large number of people could err in aesthetic matters, the empirical discovery of the purely descriptive fact that a given artwork has been preserved and continuously appreciated over a long period of time is not enough to support the normative conclusion that the work possesses aesthetic worth.

At best, the empirically gained insight that many people from different times were (rightly or wrongly) appreciative of the artwork and tried to do their best to prevent it from being destroyed or forgotten may give us reason to consider the work more closely and to review our opinion, especially when we do not yet value the work as highly as critics did in the past. Having previously failed to appreciate Homer's *Odyssey*, the realization of what it really means for it to have survived and been admired during all those centuries should move us to re-examine its aesthetic quality and may perhaps help us to recognize its proper worth.

#### 4.5 Conclusion: Aesthetic Rationalism

The preceding considerations have argued that the relevance of third-personal empirical evidence for aesthetic appreciation is rather limited.

That most aesthetic properties are response-dependent and, especially, normative means that they are not open to measurement. And the very specific and holistic character of the contribution of aesthetic and non-aesthetic features to the realization of (other) aesthetic properties, as well as to the rationalization of the corresponding aesthetic judgements, means that we do not have empirical access to aesthetic principles that could be meaningfully used as premises in inferences to aesthetic conclusions. This—together with the fact that our experiential or emotional access to aesthetic properties and their non-aesthetic realization is very restricted too (see Dorsch 2007 and 2014)—is why the truth of (E1) should be denied: empirical evidence cannot provide any non-inferential or inferential justification for aesthetic judgements.

The specification of which of our aesthetic judgements are adequate, on the other hand, amounts to the determination of which of them have been formed under conditions suitable for aesthetic judgement—and, notably, by a sufficiently experienced, knowledgeable, discerning, and attentive critic. But assessing the quality of an aesthetic judge presupposes that we have some prior grasp of the aesthetically relevant non-aesthetic features of the artworks concerned and of their concrete contribution to the realization of the aesthetic qualities and values of those works—something which empirical evidence cannot deliver, as concluded before. (E2) should therefore be rejected as well.

Finally, while empirical studies reveal that many of our aesthetic judgements are actually biased in inappropriate ways, this does not yet suffice to establish the sceptical conclusion that we should avoid making any aesthetic judgements. Indeed, instead of ruling out any possibility of progress or improvement, the empirical investigations concerned may in fact help us to **better** or refine our critical capacities and to

make progress in our aesthetic understanding and evaluation of art. Accordingly, (E<sub>3</sub>) remains so far unsupported.

The refutation of these three central claims of aesthetic empiricism leads naturally to the endorsement of aesthetic rationalism. In particular, aesthetic rationalism provides us with a better explanation of how we actually do recognize aesthetic properties and their non-aesthetic realizers (if not by empirical means). The idea is that the best method for the recognition of many aesthetic qualities, and more or less all aesthetic values, is to engage in reasoning and to discriminate between those underlying features that help to make sense of the ascription of aesthetic properties, and those that do not. For instance, on the basis of noticing that the elegance of an outline drawing of a face speaks strongly in favour of a positive evaluation, while its overemphasized realism supports a slightly negative assessment, it may be reasonable to judge that the drawing is somewhat beautiful.

The underlying assumption is that only realizers of aesthetic value can figure as aesthetic reasons, that is, as features in terms of which we can explain the presence of aesthetic value. Of course, there are likely to be many realizers—especially lower-level ones—that we are unable to recognize as reasons. But we can still identify them as realizers of aesthetic value in a more indirect fashion, namely by identifying them as realizers of aesthetic reasons. We recognize that the saturation of the colour patches of a painting, say, are partly responsible for its lack of aesthetic worth because we notice that they engender the garishness of the painting, and because we recognize this garishness as an aesthetic defect that outweighs all present merits. The epistemology of aesthetic realizers is therefore, to a significant extent, an epistemology of aesthetic reasons.

Although aesthetic reasoning surely relies in part on the conceptual and default principles introduced above, it is also to be expected that quite a lot of the rational balancing involvement happens without the help of any principles—not the least because there may not be any principles which tell us how various default merits and defects interact with each other in their joint realization of aesthetic value.<sup>15</sup> But this is unproblematic since there is no reason to assume that all or even much of aesthetic reasoning proceeds deductively, or involves inductive or abductive forms of principle-governed inference.

Consider the analogous case of judging the number of participants in a protest march who gather in a square that we overlook from an elevated position. We may perhaps be able to start with the knowledge that their number is higher than one hundred, and lower than one thousand—perhaps because experience has told us that the square offers space for maximally about one thousand people, and because we see that more than a tenth of the square is filled. For a more precise informed guess, however, we have to rely on our various impressions of the mass of people in front of us (e.g., when we

<sup>15</sup> See Bergqvist's (2010) and Kirwin's (2011) discussion of whether Sibley assumed such principles to be available or not.

look at it from different angles), without the need for, or availability of, relevant principles. Something very similar may happen when we experience an artwork and come to know its aesthetic worth by considering the rational force of its features. Our different impressions pull us in different directions, and we begin to weigh them against each other. But reaching an equilibrium among them does not presuppose reliance on principles linking the merit- or defect-constituting features to the respective value.

Although the resulting picture of aesthetic evaluation is rationalistic in character, it leaves significant room for third-personal empirical evidence. In addition to its role as a general corrective (e.g., when it uncovers hidden biases in our judgements), the evidence delivered by empirical studies may help us to discover some of the non-aesthetic properties of an artwork that are central to the realization of its aesthetic nature (without, of course, thereby identifying those properties as realizers or reasons). That is, some of the premises on which our aesthetic reasoning is based may be justifiably believed by us because they are the conclusions of empirical investigations. But this does not render the inferential justification of the resulting aesthetic judgements empirical, given that the inference involved is not guided by—that is, does not involve as premises—principles that are gained by third-personal empirical means. For either the reasoning proceeds in unprincipled ways, or it involves general premises that concern conceptual or normative links between aesthetic or non-aesthetic properties. In particular, both default principles (e.g., that elegant works are, by default, beautiful) and rational principles (e.g., that it makes (most) sense to ascribe sublimity to a work with those non-aesthetic and lower-level aesthetic properties) cannot be established empirically, but require our rational capacities for their discovery.

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