AESTHETIC REALISM AND METAPHOR[*]

JULIAN JONKER

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

I.

One intuition we have about critical discourse is that we can distinguish between aesthetic and non-aesthetic assertions. When we say that a composition has a quick tempo and makes much use of staccato, we are remarking upon non-aesthetic features of the work. When we say of the same composition that it is vibrant, we are, in some sense, referring to an aesthetic feature. How should we draw the line between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic features of a work, and what import does the distinction have? Frank Sibley has famously claimed that there is a way to draw a line between our aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms, and moreover that the existence of this distinction supports the existence of realistic aesthetic properties. The ensuing discussions of Sibley's claim indicate that whatever is at stake here is of great significance to aesthetics.[1]

I will suggest that even if there is a way to distinguish between our aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms and concepts, this provides no support for aesthetic realism because of the behaviour of a subset of those terms which allegedly pick out aesthetic properties. This subset is comprised of terms that are used in both the domain of the aesthetic and that of the non-aesthetic, but that in their aesthetic applications are used metaphorically. I assume a basically Davidsonian theory of metaphor; if we adopt this

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[1] A large literature has been generated around Sibley's claims, some of it critical. Highlights include Cohen, T. (1973), pp. 113-152; Kivy, P. (1975), pp. 197-211; Creed Hungerland, I. (1968), pp. 285-295; Brady, E. and Levinson, J. (2001).

approach, it is difficult to say that the relevant aesthetic terms refer to aesthetic properties.

The argument was originally put forward in Roger Scruton's *Art and imagination*.[2] I defend the argument against an attack by Nick Zangwill, and suggest that similar attempts to rescue realism about aesthetic properties are doomed to fail. In doing so, I suggest that we must characterize aesthetic discourse in terms of its fundamental dependence upon human interests.

II.

What distinguishes the aesthetic terms? If we can enumerate such terms, can we then take them to refer to genuine aesthetic *properties*?

For Sibley, aesthetic terms are distinctive because they '[require] the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation.'[3] Sibley notes that aesthetic terms are often used in conjunction with each other, but are also used in conjunction with non-aesthetic terms. Saying that a painting is balanced because of a bright spot on the extreme left explains an aesthetic feature of the painting (its balance) in terms of non-aesthetic features (the location and quality of various physical attributes). Indeed, in the presence of an aesthetic evaluation, one may demand that reasons be given for it in non-aesthetic terms, and so aesthetic features of a work ultimately depend on non-aesthetic features.

Yet non-aesthetic features do not give conditions for aesthetic descriptions. Certainly, the application of an aesthetic term is not governed by necessary and sufficient conditions, nor by a set of sufficient conditions. Attempts to give definitions for terms such as 'delicate' or 'balanced' are misguided. Nor are there *ceteris paribus* laws connecting non-aesthetic features and aesthetic features.[4] Aesthetic descriptions may indeed be negatively condition-governed, in the sense that a correct aesthetic description may presuppose the inapplicability of certain non-aesthetic terms.[5] Nevertheless, no number of non-aesthetic descriptions entail the ascription of a particular aesthetic quality. It seems then that while aesthetic features are dependent upon non-aesthetic features, the former are emergent properties, such that even a full

2   Scruton, R. (1974).
3   Sibley, F. (1959), pp. 421-450, 421.
4   Sibley, F. (1959), pp. 423-437.
5   Sibley, F. (1959), pp. 426-427, also Sibley, F. (1965): 135-159, 153.

description of the non-aesthetic features of a work and perfect conditions of observation cannot guarantee the ascription of particular aesthetic descriptions.

Ultimately, what is required for accurate ascription of aesthetic terms is that the person doing the ascribing exercise her taste by actually observing the art work.[6] Indeed, it is this impossibility of appealing to conditions that *characterizes* judgements containing aesthetic terms. When we notice this we are noticing that aesthetic assessments cannot be made mechanically, that is, without the exercise of taste: that 'is part of what "taste" means.' [7]

If it is the case that aesthetic terms cannot be spelt out by non-aesthetic terms in a condition-governed way, then how does the critic persuade either the novice or the unpersuaded that a work possesses a particular aesthetic feature? A large part of Sibley's project is to show how this is possible. For one, a critic might point out an aesthetic feature simply by talking. There are other devices: gesturing, comparison, repetition. It appears that the teaching of criticism is a kind of performance that draws the observer's attention towards something. We should cease to be puzzled about how attention might be drawn to aesthetic features in this way, once we acknowledge their existence as really existing properties: for '[a]esthetic concepts are as natural, as little esoteric, as any others.'[8] It is this realism about aesthetic *properties* that allows us to characterize aesthetic ascriptions as non-condition-governed, and yet learnable.

III.

Scruton's main objection to Sibley is based on ambiguity. A word like 'delicate' can be used to describe an aesthetic feature of a prelude, as well as a non-aesthetic feature of an iced flower. Sibley would claim that application of the term in the aesthetic case is non-condition-governed, and that this distinguishes aesthetic applications from non-aesthetic applications of the word. But this is to say that the word 'delicate' is ambiguous, since the criteria for its ascription differ in each case, much as we have distinct criteria for the financial and fluvial uses of the word 'bank.' Indeed, not only do the criteria for each use of the word differ on Sibley's account, but there can be no condition-governed relation between the two sets of criteria, as might be the case for verb and noun forms of a word like 'mail'.

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[6]   Sibley, F. (1959), p. 437.
[7]   Sibley, F. (1959), p. 436.
[8]   Sibley, F. (1959), p. 445.

However, it is unlikely that someone could fully understand the aesthetic use of the word 'delicate' without understanding its non-aesthetic use. It seems to do violence to our aesthetic discourse to imagine that these are technical terms with no conceptual relationship to their homonymic counterparts. If words such as 'delicate' and 'sad' were truly ambiguous between contexts, we could just as well generate technical terms such as 'jerroldic' or 'keefy' to take their place in aesthetic discourse. How would one teach the application of these terms? By gesturing and comparison, certainly; yet ultimately one would have to resort to words such as 'delicate' and 'sad' in order to explain to the neophyte why we remark upon these features at all. Indeed, the learner might accurately group together all the keefy pictures, but we would still question whether she had understood what it is for a picture to be keefy if she could not then point to some relationship between keefiness and sadness.

As Scruton explains, 'a very important connection is broken' if we declare that the sadness of people, the sadness of certain pieces of music, and the sadness of certain events are entirely unrelated.[9] If we were to do so, '[a]esthetic interest [would] become an entirely autonomous and unrelated section of human activity, whose significance and value [would] be impossible to assess.'[10] The problem with the breaking of this connection between aesthetics and the rest of human life is that we lose the point of aesthetic evaluation. A critic who is able to identify all the works that are 'sad' or 'delicate' in the aesthetic sense, but is not able to see the connection with the non-aesthetic senses of these words, has lost the understanding of why it *matters* to judge whether a work has these features or not. So, it seems, we must turn away from Sibley's version of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic.

Nick Zangwill has noticed that Scruton's argument is concerned with the metaphoricity of much aesthetic discourse.[11] As noted, a term like 'delicate' has its primary use in non-aesthetic discourse. The *aesthetic* application of 'delicate' is appropriately thought of as metaphorical. Thus, a sculpture that is described as delicate by a critic may in fact be made of the sturdiest materials: it is not literally delicate. A significant subset of the terms used in aesthetic discourse are like this,

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[9] Scruton, R. (1974), p. 40.
[10] Scruton, R. (1974), pp. 41-42.
[11] Zangwill, N. (1991), pp. 57-62, 60.

even once we acknowledge that there are many terms that describe aesthetic features quite literally (such as 'beautiful').[12]

I propose, without being able to argue for it here, that we adopt Davidson's influential view of metaphor. If we do so, then we are bound to say that the aesthetic use of 'delicate' does not invoke a distinct, metaphorical meaning. In fact, it is the literal meaning of the word that does all the work, and the work that it does is not the semantic work of conveying truth conditions, but rather the pragmatic work of urging us to *notice* a particular state of affairs.[13] It follows that a significant subset of terms used in aesthetic discourse are not only metaphorical, but that their meanings are their literal meanings, even though their literal ascription is false.

Now, this may not be a problem for distinguishing between aesthetic and non-aesthetic *terms*, for such a distinction does not depend on aesthetic talk being communicative of truth. It is however a problem for any such distinction invoking the existence of aesthetic *properties*. If it makes any sense to talk of properties of an object, then it must be possible to make sense of saying that the object truly does or does not have those properties. Yet this is just what the metaphorical nature of aesthetic talk denies.

IV.

John MacKinnon has responded to Scruton by claiming that Sibley in fact acknowledges the figurative nature of much aesthetic discourse. Sibley notes that '[a]esthetic concepts, *all of them*, carry with them attachments and in one way or another are tethered to or parasitic upon non-aesthetic features.'[14] Thus, according to MacKinnon, Sibley avoids ambiguity and 'passionately defends the very connections between our aesthetic and other interests that ambiguity is supposed to threaten.'[15] But it is not enough to simply proclaim the connection between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms, especially once Sibley has urged us to distinguish them.

Zangwill's account can be read as an attempt to flesh out what such a connection might be. Note first of all that Zangwill's underlying concern is not Scruton's denial of a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic, but rather Scruton's more

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[12] Sibley, F. (1959), p. 422-423.
[13] Davidson, D. (2001a), pp. 245-264.
[14] Sibley, F. (1959), p. 442.
[15] MacKinnon, J. (2000), p. 386.

fundamental denial of aesthetic realism.[16] The two are closely related: realism about aesthetic properties requires that in making aesthetic assertions we pick out genuine aesthetic properties which belong to the objects of our assertions. As Zangwill points out, the problem for the realist is that this must then also be true of metaphorical aesthetic terms, which therefore have meanings different to the meanings they have in non-aesthetic contexts. However, this positing of metaphorical meanings goes against the Davidsonian theory of metaphor; and if such aesthetic terms can have no metaphorical meanings, then there can be no genuine aesthetic properties to which they refer.[17] It does not help that some aesthetic terms (such as 'beautiful') are not metaphorical, for declaring that only these terms refer to genuine aesthetic properties does not rescue realism about aesthetic discourse in general, given the pervasiveness of metaphorical aesthetic terms.

In response, Zangwill claims that while a metaphor has no linguistic meaning other than its literal one, it does have a special meaning 'on the level of thought.'[18] A word like 'delicate' therefore has one linguistic meaning, but employs different concepts: 'delicate$_A$' in aesthetic discourse and 'delicate$_{NA}$' in non-aesthetic discourse. How can these two concepts be pulled apart in this way without running into Scruton's argument from ambiguity? Zangwill's answer is that there *is* a connection between the two concepts, but that the connection is causal, not semantic. In particular, one's acquisition of the aesthetic concept is causally dependent on one's acquisition of the non-aesthetic concept, so that one cannot acquire the aesthetic concept without first acquiring the non-aesthetic one.[19]

However, it is not clear that Zangwill's causal account accurately identifies the aesthetic terms in a way that avoids Scruton's worries about ambiguity. Consider a French critic who, being in agreement with my expressed taste about a painting, declares that 'cette peinture est délicate.' On Zangwill's account, the critic has two concepts in her head, délicate$_{NA}$ and délicate$_A$, and délicate$_A$ has its causal origin in the non-aesthetic sense of the word 'délicate', that is, in délicate$_{NA}$. But it is perfectly feasible that in talking to her audience in English, she guesses that the correct translation for 'délicate' is 'delicate,' and I confirm her choice of words.

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[16] Zangwill, N. (1991), p. 57 *et passim*.
[17] Zangwill, N. (1991), p. 57-58.
[18] Zangwill, N. (1991), p. 58.
[19] Zangwill, N. (1991), pp. 58-59.

Now it seems unreasonable to suppose that délicate$_A$ and delicate$_A$ are different concepts, especially if we take a Davidsonian approach to conceptual schemes,[20] so the problem is not that the critic's concept delicate$_A$ is not causally connected in the right way to her concept of delicate$_{NA}$ (since by assumption it is causally connected to délicate$_{NA}$, and, since I have confirmed her usage, it is causally connected to my concept delicate$_{NA}$). But there is something odd about the situation, namely that the French critic could not *with confidence* now use the English word 'delicate' in a non-aesthetic situation, at least not without confirmation again that this is the correct translation also in the non-aesthetic situation.

This air of uncertainty lingers because her association of the aesthetic concept delicate$_A$ with the word 'delicate' arises from a mere causal link between delicate$_A$ and delicate$_{NA}$, rather than a semantic one. Where the causal link can no longer be traced back because of a change of language, it is no longer obvious that the term used in an aesthetic context can also be used in a non-aesthetic context. What is odd about the above situation is that we take a critic who has learnt to apply 'delicate' in aesthetic contexts as being able also to understand its use in non-aesthetic contexts. Anything else would render the word ambiguous. Thus a causal connection does not seem adequate to accounting for the deep connection between aesthetic and non-aesthetic uses of a word.

V.

Let us however consider Zangwill's causal account in greater detail. A language user goes from being able to state that something is delicate$_{NA}$ to being able to state that something *looks* delicate$_{NA}$, on the basis of an essentially subjective judgement. It is a short distance from here to having an aesthetic concept, since the same kind of subjective judgement is involved in declaring that a work of art *is* delicate$_A$.[21] Therefore we can take the word 'delicate' as used in the aesthetic context as describing a genuine *experience* rather than a feature of an object.[22]

Zangwill provides no more than this sketch – the point is to show that it is possible to generate some causal account that evades Scruton's argument. The strength of this particular causal picture, moreover, is that it accounts for the ineliminability of

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[20] Davidson,D. ,(2001b), pp. 183-198.
[21] Zangwill, N. (1991), p. 61.
[22] Zangwill, N. (1991).

metaphor. In moving from a description of an object to a description of a phenomenological event we must make use of metaphor: there are no other words that will suffice, since literal language is, according to Zangwill, insufficient for phenomenological description.[23]

Yet even in its detailed form, it is unlikely that this causal story can survive the objection made above. Nevertheless, the present section will show that even if we were to accept Zangwill's more elaborate account, the result would be to drain the meaning from those results which the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic seeks to underwrite.

Note first that Zangwill's argument has moved him from claiming to be a realist about the aesthetic properties of objects to being a realist about aesthetic experiences. Is this still aesthetic realism? In fact, Zangwill's solution cannot achieve those things which realism sets out to ensure, being those same objectives which give sense to the search for a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic.

One thing we might ask of aesthetic realism is that it give us a foundation for objective normative statements. This has been a goal of aesthetics at least since Hume posed his 'paradox' of taste. How can we account for the fact that it seems accurate to say of Verdi's *Requiem* that it is harrowing (rather than frivolous)? One answer is to posit genuine aesthetic properties. If aesthetic realism were true, then such properties would exist as properties of the art work, independently of the observer, anchoring our judgements and satisfying certain assertions.

Now consider Zangwill's renewed realism: we are asked to be realist not about the observer-independent properties of objects, but about the experiences of observers. It may be conceded that such experiences really do exist, and that they are indeed experiences of the objects with which we are concerned, but this is very far from anchoring observer-independent judgements about objects.

We might also ask of realism that it provide a basis for an irreducible domain for aesthetic study. Without genuine aesthetic properties, we could always interpret aesthetic discourse as being something else: dressed-up talk about non-aesthetic properties, delusional conversations, or indirect assertions about mental states. But this is exactly the position to which Zangwill has retreated. By claiming that aesthetic terms refer to experiences, he preserves the distinction between aesthetic and non-

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[23] Zangwill, N. (1991), pp. 60-61.

aesthetic, but at the expense of making the aesthetic terms into descriptions of mental states rather than genuine properties of observed objects. If one aim of realism is to show what distinguishes the study of aesthetics from, say, psychology, then this is not realism.

Zangwill's account fails precisely because of the particular causal story he tells. Recall that we go from a judgement about a non-aesthetic concept to a judgement about whether an object appears to have the non-aesthetic concept, to being able to make a judgement that an object has the aesthetic concept with the same name. The problem is with the first step. Once we have gone from making judgements about an object *having* a non-aesthetic property to an object *appearing* to have a non-aesthetic property, we have left behind talk about properties. Certainly, an object need not have the requisite property in order for one to say that it seems to have it: the cupcake may appear dainty, when this is in fact an illusion created by distance. There is no property of daintiness here. Nor does it seem very helpful to say that the appearance of daintiness is a property that the cupcake has, since it is unclear how perspectival disagreement and property talk are to co-exist. We might relativize truth-conditional ascription of such a phenomenon to the observer in order to capture the existence of such disagreement, but then the ascribed feature can no longer be said to be a property of the *object*.

One might suppose that Zangwill just needs a different causal account, but in fact any account of the metaphorical nature of much aesthetic talk must depart from realist commitments. The reason is that metaphorical terms are not just a kind of counterexample to clearcut distinctions between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms. Nor is the challenge due to the ineliminability of metaphor. Rather, in the proximity of metaphor to all aesthetic discourse, we see something important about how such discourse operates. Like metaphor, aesthetic discourse urges us to notice something. What we notice is indeed a genuine state of affairs, and is based in some (possibly non-condition-governed) way upon the non-aesthetic features of the work. It is also based in some important way upon human interests. To say that a painting is balanced is simply to talk about its non-aesthetic features from a human point of view. We might call this a property, but it is a weak kind of property, relying as it does upon human experience and judgement. It is not the kind of property that can buy us any of the things that realism advertises.

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