

How Can Aesthetic Value Judgments Be Justified

In a recent paper titled “Why Aesthetic Value Judgments Cannot Be Justified” (to which this paper forms a sequel) I have been citing, strengthening and inventing arguments against the very possibility of justification of aesthetic judgments. As the present title suggests, I do not subscribe to the skeptical conclusion implied by the name of that paper, which was meant as a challenge: anyone, who subscribes to a theory of art evaluation which assumes or tries to establish that some works of art are (objectively) better than others and that aesthetic judgments are not just statements expressing personal likes and dislikes, should show how such arguments can be refuted or diffused. This is what I propose to do here together with a presentation of a new theory of art evaluation, which is based on the idea that works of art should be compared with their own alternatives (or versions) that can be thought of as unrealized possibilities of the work under consideration.

In part I, two types of aesthetic judgements are distinguished: categorical judgements (such as “work of art W is harmonious”) and comparative ones (such as “W is more harmonious than W’”). It is shown that comparative judgements are more basic since categorical judgements can be derived from them. The main argument against the possibility of justification of comparative judgements is then restated: Since works of art are unique their aesthetic properties are unique, i.e., work specific, i.e., indexical. Hence, for example, harmony of a work of art is always relative to the elements and features which are harmonized. And since every work is constituted by different elements and features there is no common ground for comparing the harmony of W with the harmony of W’. Comparative aesthetic judgements such as “W is more harmonious than W’”) thus cannot be justified since their aesthetic properties (harmony₁ and harmony₂, in this case) are *incommensurable*.

Having shown and illustrated that aesthetic properties of even the most similar works are incommensurable I then pose (in part II) the question of whether one can conceive of any object such that the indexicality of its aesthetic properties would not automatically render it incommensurable with the work we want to evaluate. In other words, can there be anything with which the work can be compared so that the

comparison would not be aesthetically pointless? The answer is that works of art can and should be compared with their own versions (alternatives).

In part III the concept of version and the related concept of alteration are clarified and illustrated by examples. A version of a given work of art results from an alteration of its constitutive features, and an alteration is defined as such a change which does not shatter the work's basic perceptual gestalt. It is noted that a perfectly harmonious (beautiful) or unified work of art can only be spoiled but not improved by its alterations and an absolutely disharmonious (ugly) can only be improved but not spoiled by them. Between the two limiting extremes there is a continuum on which real works of art can be projected. The more unified the work the more difficult it is to improve it and the easier it is to damage it by alterations of its constitutive features.

In part IV I offer a model for justification of aesthetic judgements which is presented in a form of a formula. Aesthetic value is construed as a function which takes as arguments different kinds of alterations to which a work of art can be subjected. The suggested model is this:

$$\text{AeV (W)} = (\mathbf{a-b}) \cdot (\mathbf{a+b+c}) \cdot \mathbf{c}$$

AeV (W) stands for the aesthetic value of a work of art; **a** stands for the number of aesthetically damaging alteration, **b** stand for the number of alterations that improves the work; while **c** stands for number of alterations that are aesthetically neutral. It is noted that the three components correspond to the concepts of unity, complexity and intensity respectively and that their logical structure of these concepts is thus laid bare.

In part V objections to the proposed model are considered.

Part VI considers to what extent the principle on which the theoretical model is constructed – namely that works of art are to be compared with their own alternatives – is manifest in practice. It is suggested that the process of creation is largely about imagining and choosing between alternatives to the initial conception of the work, that teaching art largely consists in suggesting alterations to that which students produce, and that criticism often alludes to the works' unrealized possibilities, i.e., to their

alternatives. Pointing to aesthetically inferior alternatives of a given work will provide evidence for positive estetic judgements, while aesthetically superior alternatives will point out its faults.