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Beauty and the Sensory-Dependence-Thesis

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ABSTRACT. The sensory-dependence-thesis claims that beauty necessarily depends in part on sensory properties. Consequently, judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects like, for example, character traits or mathematical proofs, can only be understood metaphorically. Aestheticians have disagreed about this thesis throughout the history of aesthetics. Despite this enduring disagreement, hardly any meta-theoretical debate about the sensory-dependence-thesis exists. This paper aims to start such a debate. It accepts Gaut's challenge that the burden of proof is on the defenders of the thesis and examines four arguments supporting it. According to the first argument, the sensory-dependence-thesis should be accepted because judgements of beauty are made immediately and must therefore depend on immediately accessible, sensory properties. According to the second, because it best explains the intuitively appealing and widely accepted acquaintance principle. According to the third, because, etymologically considered, "aesthetic" means "pertaining to sense perception" and hence all aesthetic properties have to partly depend on sensory properties. According to the fourth, because any theory of beauty should avoid impoverishing our means of expression and rejecting the sensory-dependence-thesis would lead to such an impoverishment. This paper argues that although the first three arguments fail, the fourth provides a good metatheoretical reason for the sensory-dependence-thesis.

i. Introduction

Think of a piece of music, a birdsong, a painting, or a landscape, and try to imagine that you find them beautiful. And now try to imagine that how they sound or look like has not influenced your judgements of beauty. Assumedly, that is hard to imagine. The beauty of those objects depends on their sensory properties, especially, on their sounds and colours.¹ This

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¹ This paper will not discuss whether beauty can only depend on visual and auditory, perhaps even only on visual properties, as some authors suggest, see, e.g., Scruton (2011), p. 20; Tatarkiewicz (1972), p. 166; Tolstoy (1899), pp. 13-14. It allows that beauty can also depend in part on gustatory, olfactory, and tactual properties.

does neither mean that beauty itself is a sensory property, nor that it completely depends on sensory properties, only that it partly depends on them. This thesis is rather uncontroversial. It becomes controversial, however, if beauty has to partly depend on sensory properties. Exactly this is the claim of the sensory-dependence-thesis. If one accepts this thesis, judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects cannot be interpreted in a literal sense. Non-sense-perceptual features or objects cannot be directly perceived by the senses, although they might be accessible by means of sense perception.² The character of a person, for example, has no colour, or sound, or any other sensory property. Although gestures or facial expression are perceptible by the senses and can give some hints, what kind of character a person has needs to be *inferred* based on various observations.³ Consequently, a judgement of beauty about the character of a person, that is, a judgement of inner beauty, can only be understood metaphorically. The same holds for judgements of beauty about proofs, theorems, theories, or ideas, or about the mere content of poems or novels, or about non-sense-perceptual conceptual works of art.

The sensory-dependence-thesis is controversial as a look into the history of aesthetics shows. Although ancient and medieval philosophers tend to reject the thesis, whereas contemporary aestheticians tend to accept it, one finds defenders and opponents of it at all times.⁴ Defenders are amongst others Beardsley, Burke, Danto, Kant, Schiller, and Zangwill.⁵ Opponents are amongst others Gaut, Hutcheson, McGinn, Plato, Plotinus, and Reid.⁶

Opponents can point out that that we attribute beauty to non-sense-perceptual features and objects in everyday life.⁷ From time to time, we speak about beautiful character traits, characters, or souls, about the beautiful content of literary works, about beautiful theorems, proofs, and ideas,

² See, e.g., Binkley (1977), p. 269; Costello (2013), p. 277; p. 295; Shelley (2003), p. 372.

³ See, e.g., Schmitt & Altstötter-Gleich (2010), p. 9.

⁴ For example, Plato (1925, 298 a) and Aristotle (1997, 146a.21) mention the view that beauty is what is pleasant to the eyes and ears, see also Tatarkiewicz (1972), pp. 165-166.

⁵ See, e.g., Beardsley (1962), p. 624; Burke (1990), p. 83, pp. 101-102; Danto (2003), p. 93; Kant (1986); Schiller (1971), p. 28; Zangwill (2001), p. 122, p. 127.

⁶ See, e.g., Gaut, (2007), chap. 6; Hutcheson (2004), p. 24; McGinn (1997), chap. 5; Plato (1925); (2006); Plotinus (2002); Reid (1796), p. 424; p. 448.

⁷ See, e.g., Gaut (2007), p. 124; Meskin (2004), p. 74.

and so on. Furthermore proverbs like “True beauty comes from within” testify the widespread belief that beauty should not be restricted to the sensory realm. But other proverbs like “Beauty is only skin-deep” support the sensory-dependence-thesis. And defenders of the thesis can point out that we do not attribute beauty as naturally and easily to non-sense-perceptual features and objects as to sense-perceptual ones. If we call a person beautiful based on her character, we not simply say that she is beautiful. We tend to add that we speak about inner beauty. If, on the other hand, we judge her to be beautiful based on her outward appearance, we feel no need to explain or clarify our statement. So the sensory-dependence-thesis is controversial both on a philosophical and a pretheoretical, intuitive level.

Given this disagreement, it surprises that hardly any aesthetic debate about the sensory-dependence-thesis exists.⁸ The reason might be that the sensory-dependence-thesis follows, for example, from Kant’s theory of (free) beauty, but not from a Platonic theory of beauty. The crucial question might not be whether to accept the sensory-dependence-thesis, but whether to accept a Platonic, or Kantian, or any other elaborated theory of beauty. Thinking about the sensory-dependence-thesis independently from an elaborated theory of beauty, that is, on a metatheoretical level, might not be necessary.

But not few aestheticians accept or reject the sensory-dependence-thesis not as a consequence of their theories, but as a basic assumption.⁹ And it is a natural first step into elaborating a theory of beauty to think about the scope of beauty, that is, about what kind of objects can be called literally beautiful. Accepting the sensory-dependence-thesis leads to a narrow scope of beauty allowing only judgements of beauty about sense-perceptual features and objects to be understood literally. Rejecting the

⁸ Exceptions prove the rule, see, e.g., Gaut (2007), chap. 6. Some authors discuss the extended sensory-dependence-thesis, that is, whether aesthetic properties have to partly depend on sensory properties, see, e.g., Carroll (2004); Shelley (2003); Zangwill (2001), chap. 8. Section 4 of this paper will discuss the extended sensory-dependence-thesis in detail.

⁹ For example, Burke and Reid both explain beauty in terms of loveability, but whereas Burke (1990, p. 83) accepts the sensory-dependence-thesis at the beginning of his treatise, Reid (1796, p. 448), denies it.

thesis leads to a wide scope of beauty allowing also judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features and objects to be understood literally. The scope of beauty determines which judgements a theory of beauty has to analyse in detail. Furthermore, a wide scope is sometimes considered as suggesting a subjectivist theory.¹⁰ Additionally, a wide scope gives a reason to reject a theory of beauty that cannot explain judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects.¹¹ A narrow scope, on the other hand, gives a reason to reject or restrict a theory of beauty that allows non-sense-perceptual features and objects to be literally beautiful. So the sensory-dependence-thesis can influence what kind of theory of beauty one formulates and/or whether one approves of an elaborated theory. Some metatheoretically acceptable arguments for or against the sensory-dependence-thesis are desirable. The premises of such arguments should not only be acceptable by representatives of one specific elaborated theory of beauty, but of different theories of beauty in order to count as metatheoretically acceptable.

Gaut argues that the burden of proof rests with the defenders of the thesis.¹² Attributing beauty to non-sense-perceptual features or objects is neither uncommon, nor obviously false, nor senseless. This provides prima facie evidence for a literal interpretation. In order to argue against such a literal interpretation, the sensory-dependence-thesis has to be defended because it blocks a literal interpretation. This article accepts Gaut's challenge. It considers four arguments supporting the sensory-dependence-thesis, at which one can find hints in literature. Section 2 discusses the argument of immediacy, section 3 the argument of the acquaintance principle, section 4 the etymological argument, and section 5 the argument of irreducibility. It will turn out that only the fourth argument provides a good metatheoretical reason for the sensory-dependence-thesis. To avoid any misunderstanding, this paper defends the sensory-dependence-thesis only with respect to beauty. It does not extend it to all aesthetic properties.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Reid (1796), p. 779; Sircello (1975), p. 5.

¹¹ See, e.g., Plotinus (2002), p. 28.

¹² See Gaut (2007), p. 124.

2. The Argument of Immediacy

To begin with, sometimes we say something like “I can see that this rose is beautiful” or “I hear the beauty of this song”. Straightforwardly interpreted, this way of speaking implies that beauty itself is a sensory property. But, first, beauty would have to be perceptible by different senses, although normally sensory properties can only be perceived by one sense. Colours can be seen, sounds be heard, and so on. And beauty is not always purely visual or auditory (or purely gustatory, olfactory, or tactual). The beauty of some objects does not neatly fall into one of these categories. The beauty of a person, for example, is not purely visual, but also partly auditory and olfactory.¹³ So beauty would be a rather odd sensory property, not clearly connected to one of the senses. Secondly, if two persons perceive an object under the same circumstances and if their senses are not seriously impaired, they should have the same sense perception. But they can and often do disagree in their judgements of beauty.¹⁴ Thus if we say that we perceive that something is beautiful, this way of speaking should not be understood as implying that beauty itself is a sensory quality.

Rather, this common way of speaking may simply point out that how we perceive sensory properties and how we form judgements of beauty saliently resemble each other, namely, in their immediacy. We immediately see, for example, that a rose is red and immediately judge that it is beautiful. Inspired by this similarity, one can try to develop an argument for the sensory-dependence-thesis, even for its stronger version: (P₁^{IM}) Judgements about the beauty of x are/can be made immediately. (P₂^{IM}) If judgements about the beauty of x are or can be made immediately, beauty has to depend on immediately accessible properties of x. (P₃^{IM}) Immediately accessible properties of x are its sensory properties or depend on those. Consequently, beauty has to depend on sensory properties. The crucial question is what “immediately” exactly means in the context of this argument. One can think of a temporal, an epistemic, and a logical interpretation.

Temporally interpreted, “immediately” means “immediately after the first acquaintance with x”. Undisputedly, *some* judgements of beauty are

¹³ See, e.g., Etcoff (1999), pp. 235–241.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Hutcheson (2004), p. 24.

made immediately after the first acquaintance with an object. Sometimes we meet someone and instantly think “Wow, what a beautiful person”. Sometimes we see a hitherto unknown painting or hear piece of music for the first time and can appreciate their beauty straightaway. Examples like these are numerous. Sometimes the beauty of an object strikes us at once.

Sometimes, however, one forms a judgement of beauty, only after one has been acquainted with an object for some time, and the object in question has not always changed during this time. Sometimes one needs to look at a painting or to hear a piece of music again and again in order to appreciate their beauty. This observation does not yet defeat a temporal interpretation of PI^{IM} as long as we could have judged the beauty of the painting or the piece of music at once. Perhaps, we have not seen the painting’s beauty at once because we have been inattentive or have concentrated on the “wrong” features. If we would have looked more carefully, we could have instantly seen its beauty. Perhaps, we have not heard the music’s beauty because we have had a lack of musical education at this time. Otherwise, we would have heard the beauty at once.

But some works of art are very complex, and one simply needs time to get to know the whole work, no matter how well educated one is and how attentively or carefully one studies the work. And judgements of beauty are not only about works of art. Think, for example, about judgements of beauty about human beings. At the first encounter with a person, one gets to know one aspect of her character, if one is lucky. In order to really get to know her character, one needs time, one has to observe her in different situations at different times, and has to talk and listen to her. That is why judgements of beauty about the character of a person cannot be made immediately after the first acquaintance with a person. One can deny that this an examples of a literal judgement of beauty, but this would beg the question. So temporarily interpreted, only some, but not all judgements of beauty can be made immediately after the first acquaintance with an object.¹⁵ But this restricted reading of PI does not suffice to argue for the sensory-dependence-thesis, which applies to all judgements of beauty.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Hume (2006), p. 5; Reid (1796), p. 455.

Epistemically interpreted, “immediately” means “without any (conceptual) knowledge about x”. This interpretation is inspired by remarks of Hutcheson and Kant.¹⁶ Basically, both authors defend the same idea.¹⁷ We can form a judgement of beauty about an object even if we do not know what kind of object it is. We do not have to know whether it is a human being, a work of art, a flower, or anything else. We also do not have to know what it symbolises or which purpose it fulfils. Judgements of beauty do not require any conceptual knowledge about an object.

But if one prefers a theory of beauty explaining beauty primarily in terms of perfection, some conceptual knowledge about the object of the judgement of beauty seems to be necessary. Representatives of such theories would hence reject the epistemic interpretation of P_1^{IM} . And even Kant would only defend the epistemic interpretation of P_1^{IM} with respect to some judgements of beauty, namely, those of free beauty. Judgements of dependent beauty presuppose a concept of the object in question.¹⁸ So one cannot metatheoretically defend that all judgements of beauty can be made without any (conceptual) knowledge about the object in question, and the epistemic interpretation of P_1^{IM} therefore is not a good premise for a metatheoretically acceptable argument in favour of the sensory-dependence-thesis.

Logically interpreted, “immediately” means “non-inferentially”. Accordingly, P_1^{IM} claims that judgements of beauty are not inferred from principles. Representatives of aesthetic rationalism would reject such an interpretation of P_1^{IM} .¹⁹ Yet, following the British empiricist tradition and of course Kant’s influential aesthetic theory, the logical interpretation of P_1^{IM} has become a commonplace in aesthetics.²⁰ And our everyday life experience seems to confirm this assumption. We do not reason out that something is beautiful, although we sometimes try to explain our judgements of beauty afterwards. And we lack any sufficiently concrete principles of beauty from which we could infer that something is beautiful,

¹⁶ See Hutcheson (2004), 25; Kant (1963), AA V 207.

¹⁷ Carroll (2001, pp. 25-26) interprets Hutcheson in this sense.

¹⁸ See Kant (1963), § 16.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Beiser (2009), p. 2; Shelley (2013), § 1.1.

²⁰ See, e.g., Hutcheson (2004), 25; Kant (1963), AA V 216; Mothersill (1984), chap. IV/V; Shelley (2013), § 1.1.; Sibley (1965), p. 153.

and aesthetics has failed to provide us with such principles. The logical interpretation of P_1^{IM} is hence both intuitive appealing and widely accepted in aesthetics.

Hutcheson points out that forming a judgement of beauty resembles sense perception in this respect.²¹ We also do not infer that an object possesses a certain sensory property, we simply perceive it. This is one of the reasons why Hutcheson speaks of taste as an internal sense. This similarity, however, does not yet secure the success of the argument of immediacy. The logical interpretation leads to problems defending P_2^{IM} . It does not follow from the non-inferentiality of judgements of beauty that beauty has to depend on non-inferentially accessible properties. Let us assume that the beauty of an object partly depends on a property, which has to be inferred. Yet, inferring the property and forming a judgement of beauty are two separate processes. After one has inferred that the object possesses this property, one can non-inferentially form a judgement of beauty.²² That is why the logical interpretation of the argument of immediacy fails at P_2^{IM} .

To recap, the temporal and the epistemic interpretation cannot defend P_1^{IM} with respect to all judgements of beauty, and the logical interpretation cannot defend P_2^{IM} . So although forming a judgement of beauty resembles sense perception, both are made non-inferentially, this resemblance does not suffice to establish the sensory-dependence-thesis.

3. The Argument of the Acquaintance Principle

The second argument draws on the so-called acquaintance principle. The basic idea of the acquaintance principle is that one cannot judge and appreciate something aesthetically without a first-hand experience. Judgements of beauty are traditionally considered as examples of aesthetic (value) judgements. Hence the acquaintance principle also applies to them, and sometimes the principle is explicitly formulated with reference to judgements of beauty.²³ Focused on judgements of beauty, the principle claims

²¹ See Hutcheson (2004), 25.

²² See, e.g., Hume (2006), p. 5; Shelley (2013), § 1.1.

²³ See, e.g., Kant (1963), p. AA V 216; Reid (1796), p. 429.

that a first-hand experience of an object is prerequisite for a judgement of beauty. Consequently, I cannot judge an object to be beautiful if I am not personally acquainted with it, even if someone else has described it to me or has asserted that it is beautiful.

The argument of the acquaintance principle is inspired by an observation made by Konisberg.²⁴ Often the acquaintance principle and the sensory dependence of beauty (or aesthetic properties in general)²⁵ are mentioned and defended in the same context.²⁶ Therefore it seems natural to speculate that a close connection between the acquaintance principle and the sensory-dependence-thesis exists. This leads to the argument of the acquaintance principle: (P₁^{AP}) A judgement of beauty about x requires a first-hand experience of x. (P₂^{AP}) The best explanation why a judgement of beauty about x requires a first-hand experience of x is that beauty has to partly depend on sensory properties of x. P₁^{AP} states the acquaintance principle focussed upon judgements of beauty. P₂^{AP} claims that the sensory-dependence-thesis best explains the acquaintance principle. So if one does not want to give up the acquaintance principle, one should also accept the sensory-dependence-thesis. One should be equally committed to the sensory-dependence-thesis as to the acquaintance principle.

Wollheim introduces the acquaintance principle as “a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics” (Wollheim 1980, 223). And various aestheticians do indeed accept the principle.²⁷ And it is not only widely accepted in aesthetics, it is also intuitively appealing.²⁸ One might object that some authors have raised the acquaintance principle to question in recent years and that it has undergone various reformulations.²⁹ For the sake of the argument, however, let us accept P₁^{AP} for the moment and turn to P₂^{AP}.

A basic objection against P₂^{AP} might be that the acquaintance principle appears to be an aesthetic axiom for which no further explanation

²⁴ See Konisberg (2012), pp. 159-160.

²⁵ See in detail section 4 of this paper.

²⁶ See, e.g., Kant (1963), AA V 216; Pettit (1987), p. 25; Tormey (1973), p. 39.

²⁷ See, e.g., Kant (1963), AA V 216; Eaton (1994), p. 392; Mothersill (1961), p. 78; (1984), p. 160; Pettit (1983), pp. 25-26; Reid (1796), p. 429; Sibley (1965), p. 137; (1974), p. 16; Tanner (2003); Tormey (1973), p. 39; Wollheim (1980), p. 223.

²⁸ See also Konigsberg (2012), p. 153.

²⁹ See, e.g., Budd (2003); Hanson (2015); Hopkins (2006); Konigsberg (2012); Livingston (2003); Meskin (2004); Robson (2013).

can be given. But in order to accept its axiomatic status, one has to show why possible explanations are not convincing. As P₂^{AP} proposes a possible explanation, one has to take P₂^{AP} seriously, even if one thinks that the acquaintance principle is an aesthetic axiom.

If one accepts the sensory-dependence-thesis, knowing the sensory quality of an object, especially, how it looks or sounds like, is prerequisite for a judgement of beauty. One way to gain this knowledge is to perceive the object by the senses, which is one way to get personally acquainted with it. Sometimes a personal acquaintance with an adequate surrogate can be equally sufficient.³⁰ If I see a high-quality photography of a painting or hear a high-quality recording of a concert, I might be able to judge the beauty of the originals. If one accepts the sensory-dependence-thesis, whether a reproduction is adequate depends on whether it can exactly or at least sufficiently convey the sensory quality of the original object.³¹

A mere verbal description of an object does not enable us to form a judgement of beauty according to the acquaintance principle. The sensory-dependence-thesis can help to understand why. Although I can learn from another person that a rose is red, I cannot learn how exactly the rose looks like. A description can convey that an object possesses certain sensory properties, but cannot convey its exact sensory quality. Therefore one cannot base one's judgement of beauty on a verbal description, it seems.³²

Admittedly, a verbal description alone is not enough. But imagine a very sensitive observer or listener who possesses the ability to describe an object in detail, vividly, and exactly. And imagine a person with an extremely well trained sensory imagination. Guided by the description of the person who has actually perceived the object, the latter person might be able to imagine the object *as if* she actually perceives it. She might be able to form a judgement of beauty without having actually perceived it in this case.³³ Although this scenario is not impossible, however, it is rather unlikely. Both, the person actually perceiving and describing the object

³⁰ See, e.g., Binkley (1977), p. 266; Carroll (2004), p. 414; Hopkins (2006), pp. 90-92; Tormey (1973), p. 39, Meskin (2004), p. 74.

³¹ For a criticism of this criteria, see, e.g., Hanson (2015), pp. 252-254; Livingston (2003), p. 263.

³² See Binkley (1977), p. 266.

³³ See, e.g., Hopkins (2006), pp. 93-94.

and the person imagining it, have to fulfil too many demanding requirements. Secondly, even if a person manages to imagine an object as if she actually perceives it, she has a quasi first-hand experience. The sensory-dependence-thesis can hence explain a slightly modified version of the acquaintance principle, namely, that a judgement of beauty about *x* requires a first-hand or quasi first-hand experience of *x* (or an adequate surrogate).

The acquaintance principle does not only deny that judgements of beauty can be based on mere verbal descriptions, but also that one can adopt a judgement of beauty from someone else. If someone tells me that a rose, which I have not seen myself, is beautiful, I am not justified in adopting this judgement of beauty, even if I know that the person is trustworthy. Aesthetic judgements seem to be not transferable from person to person (or at least only on rare occasions). The sensory-dependence-thesis should also explain why this is the case in order to count as the best explanation of the acquaintance principle.

An asymmetry regarding the reliability of sensory and aesthetic testimony is notable, though.³⁴ If someone has perceived an object under normal circumstances, if her sense perception is not seriously impaired, if she remembers what she has perceived, if she does not want to deceive me, I can learn from her which sensory properties an object has. If, for example, she tells me that a rose is red, I am justified believing that the rose is red. According to the acquaintance principle, however, I cannot adopt the belief that the rose is beautiful, even if she tells me that it is. If so, how can the sensory-dependence-thesis explain the problematic status of aesthetic testimony?

Besides this, one would have to argue that the sensory-dependence-thesis provides the best explanation in order to defend P_2^{AP} . One has reason to doubt this because it makes sense to apply the acquaintance principle also to judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects. First, also in the case of non-sense-perceptual features or objects, a mere description of non-sense-perceptual features or objects might not be sufficient for a judgement of beauty. Admittedly, sometimes a verbal description is the way to become acquainted with of some non-sense-perceptual features or objects. Hanson argues, for example, that

³⁴ See Pettit (1987), p. 25.

descriptions yield acquaintance with some conceptual works of art.³⁵ But not every non-sense-perceptual feature or object can be fully grasped by a mere verbal description. If someone paraphrases the content of a novel, outlines the basic idea of a mathematical proof, or enlists some character traits, these descriptions are an inadequate basis for a judgement of beauty. Rather, one should actually read the novel, understand and think through the mathematical proof, or meet the person personally and observe her in different situations in order to be able to judge their beauty. In other words, one needs a first-hand experience of these non-sense-perceptual features or objects in order to be able to judge their beauty. As these examples illustrate, first-hand experience does not have to be understood as first-hand sense-perceptual experience.³⁶ Secondly, also judgements of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects are not transmissible from person to person. It is problematic to adopt a judgement of beauty simply because someone else says that the content of a novel, a mathematical proof, or the character of a person is beautiful.³⁷ Once again, a first-hand experience seems to be necessary. To sum up, the acquaintance principle can also make sense in the case of judgments of beauty about non-sense-perceptual features or objects. If so, not the sensory dependence, but another feature of beauty seems to be the best explanation of the acquaintance principle, if it can be explained at all.

To sum up, as the acquaintance principle can be defended without being committed to the sensory-dependence-thesis, P₂^{AP} can be rejected. Therefore the argument of the acquaintance principle fails independently from the question whether one should actually accept the acquaintance principle.

4. The Etymological Argument

So far, not much attention has been paid to the fact that beauty counts as a paradigmatic example of an aesthetic property. The etymological roots of

³⁵ See Hanson (2015), p. 252.

³⁶ See, e.g., Eaton (1994), p. 392; Hopkins (2006), p. 90.

³⁷ Meskin (2004, pp. 89-90) claims that aesthetic testimony in the case of proofs and theories is reliable.

the word “aesthetic” lie in the ancient greek “aísthēsis”, meaning “pertaining to sense perception”.³⁸ Hence, etymologically considered, only something with a close connection to sense perception deserves to be called aesthetic.³⁹ This consideration motivates the etymological argument: (P1^E) Aesthetic properties have to partly depend on sensory properties. (P2^E) Beauty is an aesthetic property. Consequently, beauty has to partly depend on sensory properties. The core of this argument is the extended sensory-dependence-thesis, which P1^E formulates.⁴⁰ But is the extended sensory-dependence-thesis metatheoretically acceptable?

First, aesthetic properties are mostly discussed, sometimes even defined as properties relevant for art criticism in recent aesthetic debate.⁴¹ But not all properties of works of art, which seemingly matter for art criticism and evaluation, depend on the works’ sensory properties. Think, for example, of Duchamp’s *Fountain*.⁴² Danto says about this work: “it is daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever” (Danto 1981, pp.93-94). These properties influence the value of Duchamp’s *Fountain* qua work of art.⁴³ But they do not depend on the work’s sensory properties. Even if you have not seen the *Fountain*, if you know that it is an urinal customary in trade of 1917, which Duchamp has signed and put into an art exhibition, you can judge the work as daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever. How exactly the *Fountain* looks like, which colour it has, or whether something is reflected in its surface is not crucial. Or think about the criticism and evaluation of literary works of art.⁴⁴ Assuming that the content of a literary work is irrelevant for the work’s value as a work of art is rather odd. Thus it should possess aesthetic properties. As the content of a literary work is one of its non-sense-perceptual features, the content’s aesthetic properties cannot depend on sensory properties, though. Hence if one thinks about aesthetic properties in terms of properties relevant for art

³⁸ See Kovach (1974), p. 9.

³⁹ See Kovach (1974), p. 9.

⁴⁰ The extended sensory-dependence-thesis corresponds to Shelley’s (S)-thesis (2003, p. 364) and Zangwill’s weak dependence thesis (2001, p. 127).

⁴¹ See, e.g., Gaut (2007), pp. 34-35; Goldman (2009); Kivy (1975), p. 197.

⁴² See, e.g., Carroll (2004), p. 418; Shelley (2003), p. 368.

⁴³ See Shelly (2003), p. 370.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Binkley (1977), p. 269; Carroll (2003), p. 420; Eaton (1994), p. 392; Livingston (2003), pp. 265-266; Shelley (2003), pp. 373-375.

criticism, one has to reject the extended sensory-dependence-thesis. Otherwise one cannot properly criticize and evaluate some works of art.

Zangwill defends the extended sensory-dependence-thesis against this objection.⁴⁵ He distinguishes between aesthetic and artistic properties. Aesthetic properties determine the aesthetic value, artistic properties the artistic value of a work of art. And although some artistic properties are aesthetic, not all of them are. The extended sensory-dependence-thesis provides a distinguishing feature. All aesthetic, but not all artistic properties have to depend in part on sensory properties.

The advantage of this proposal is that it clearly distinguishes two separate questions, which became intermingled by the development of aesthetics and art philosophy. On the one side stands the purely art philosophical question what determines the value of a work of art qua art. On the other side stands the broader aesthetic question what an aesthetic property is. *Prima facie*, one does not have to concentrate on art in order to answer the second question because not only works of art possess aesthetic properties as the example of beauty well illustrates.

To explain what an aesthetic property is and how it is to be distinguished from a non-aesthetic property is notoriously difficult to answer and is intensively discussed in aesthetics. It is noticeable, however, that most attempts to define aesthetic properties or at least to point out salient features are not committed to the extended sensory-dependence-thesis. Let me illustrate this with some examples. First, aesthetic properties might be defined as taste properties.⁴⁶ Normal intelligence and sense perception alone are not enough to attribute aesthetic properties, rather taste as a special aesthetic sense is required. This proposal is not committed to the extended sensory-dependence-thesis as it explicitly distinguishes taste from the 'normal' senses.⁴⁷ Secondly, one can agree with Sibley that aesthetic properties depend on non-aesthetic ones and that the attribution of aesthetic properties is non-condition-governed.⁴⁸ But as non-aesthetic properties are not only sensory ones, the extended sensory-dependence-thesis does not follow from this proposal either. Thirdly, Kivy emphasises

⁴⁵ See Zangwill (2001), p. 137.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Hungerland (1962-1963), p. 43; Sibley (1959), p. 421; (1965), p. 135.

⁴⁷ See also Hutcheson (2004), p. 24.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Sibley (1959), (1965).

that we consider and enjoy aesthetic properties for their own sake.⁴⁹ But nothing prevents us from enjoying the funniness of a joke's payoff for its own sake, even if it does not depend on the sound of the words used to tell the joke. Furthermore, some authors approach aesthetic properties by giving examples.⁵⁰ Many of these exemplary aesthetic properties do not have to depend on sensory properties. Think, for example, of being unified, sentimental, or tragic. Thus, to define or at least to better understand aesthetic properties, one does not have to defend the extended sensory-dependence-thesis.

So although the extended sensory-dependence-thesis makes sense etymologically, it cannot be defended on a metatheoretical level, and hence the etymological argument fails. One can wonder whether thereby one has not found an argument against the sensory-dependence-thesis, namely, if one also rejects P2^E.⁵¹ According to P2^E, beauty is one aesthetic property amongst others. Sometimes, however, beauty is considered to be a verdictive aesthetic property, to use Zangwill's terminology.⁵² If so, judgements of beauty are the same as aesthetic value judgements. Sometimes judgements of beauty are even considered as equivalents to judgements of artistic value.⁵³ If so, saying that a work of art is beautiful means the same as saying that it is a good work of art. Aesthetic success or merit now depends on aesthetic properties, artistic success or merit on artistic properties.⁵⁴ If the extended sensory-dependence-thesis holds neither for aesthetic nor for artistic properties (if one wants to draw such a distinction), beauty does not necessarily depend on sensory properties either. The etymological argument can be turned into an argument against the sensory-dependence-thesis, it seems.

Sometimes "beauty" is indeed used as a synonym for "aesthetic success", sometimes also for "artistic success". Another, narrower meaning of beauty, however, exists.⁵⁵ First, it makes sense to point out that some

⁴⁹ See Kivy (1975), pp. 209-211.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Goldman (2009), p. 125; Kivy (1975), 197-198; Sibley (1959), p. 421-422.

⁵¹ Collingwood (1938, pp. 38-41) and Bell (1913, pp. 11-16) claim that beauty has nothing to do with aesthetic consideration. This is, however, a rather unusual position.

⁵² See Zangwill (2001), chap. 1.

⁵³ See, e.g., Kovach (1974), p. 30; Mothersill (1984).

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Zangwill (2001), chap. 1.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Scruton (2011), p. 13.

works of art are good works of art, some even masterpieces without being beautiful.⁵⁶ Duchamp's *Fountain* or Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* are just two examples of such works of art. Secondly, it also makes sense to point out that something can be aesthetically valuable without being beautiful.⁵⁷ Just think of a sublime mountain view. If so, "beauty" in this narrower sense is not a synonym for "aesthetic success" or "artistic success", although a work of art can become a good work of art (partly) because it is beautiful, or something can count as aesthetically valuable because it is beautiful. P₂^E refers to this understanding of beauty. If beauty is only an aesthetic or artistic property among others, rejecting the extended sensory-dependence-thesis does not exclude that the sensory-dependence-thesis holds for some aesthetic properties. Whether beauty is one of those aesthetic properties is still an unanswered question.

5. The Argument of Irreducibility

Short remarks of Burke and Danto inspire the fourth argument. At the beginning of his treatise on beauty, Burke writes:

"By beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it. I confine this definition to the merely sensible qualities of things, for the sake of preserving the utmost simplicity in a subject which must always distract us, whenever we take in those various causes of sympathy which attach us to any persons or things from secondary considerations, and not from the direct force which they have merely on being viewed." (Burke 1990, p. 83).⁵⁸

Danto mentions a similar idea:

"Some people are beautiful, some are not, some are downright ugly. These differences we register through the senses. We are attracted

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Danto (2003), pp. 33-37; Nehamas (2007), chap. 1; Tatarkiewicz (1972), p. 177.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Beardsley (1962), p. 626.

⁵⁸ See also Burke (1990), p. 101-102.

to people because of their beauty, and even fall in love with them because they are beautiful. But human beings have qualities of intellect and character that attract us to them despite their lack of beauty. [...] To be sure, we often commend these qualities by speaking of them as “beautiful” –but this has nothing to do with aesthetic considerations at all, and it seems to me that it muddles the concept of beauty irreparably if we say that these qualities are another species or order of beauty. [...] I propose we restrict the concept of beauty to its aesthetic identity, which refers to the senses, [...].” (Danto 2003, p. 92).

Burke accepts the sensory-dependence-thesis for the sake of simplicity and in order to avoid distractions. Danto fears that without the sensory-dependence-thesis the concept of beauty becomes irreparably muddled with other concepts. So both authors defend the sensory-dependence-thesis in order to prevent “beauty” from becoming a superfluous or muddled concept. The argument of irreducibility aims to elaborate this idea: (P₁^{IR}) A theory of beauty should not impoverish our means of expression. (P₂^{IR}) A theory of beauty has to distinguish irreducible from reducible judgements of beauty in order to prevent impoverishing our means of expression. (P₃^{IR}) If a theory of beauty rejects the sensory-dependence-thesis, it loses the means to distinguish irreducible from reducible judgements of beauty. That is why a theory of beauty should accept the sensory-dependence-thesis.

One aim of a theory of beauty is to better understand what we express by calling something beautiful. It aims at conceptual clarity. In order to achieve this aim, it concentrates on judgements of beauty, that is, on judgements using the formulation “x is beautiful” or variations of this formulation, and then try to analyse and to explain them. P₁^{IR} emphasises that a theory of beauty should feel obliged to do grasp the full meaning of judgements of beauty in their analysis. Otherwise it impoverishes our means of expression. A theory of beauty should help us to express ourselves more clearly because we better understand what speaking about beauty means, we should not be less able to express ourselves precisely.

In the case of some judgements of beauty, let us call them reducible, speaking about beauty can easily and without loss of meaning be replaced by using another concept. Sometimes, for example, if I say that a rose is

beautiful, *all* that I want to say is that the rose is agreeable. “Beauty” is just another name for agreeableness in this case. Insofar it is superfluous. Our means to express ourselves would not be impoverished if we could only speak about agreeableness and never about beauty. Not all reducible judgements of beauty might have exactly the same meaning. Depending on the context of utterance and the object in question, “x is beautiful” might sometimes mean “x is agreeable”, sometimes “x is attractive”, sometimes “x is perfect”, sometimes “x is artistically good”, and so on. A theory of beauty should carefully distinguish these different meanings. If it does not and tries to find a common denominator of these different meanings, it might conclude that the concept of beauty is extremely vague and uninteresting because all that the reducible judgements seem to have in common is that they convey a somehow positive evaluation.⁵⁹ Or it might conclude that “beauty” is a muddled concept because the different meanings of the replaceable judgements of beauty seem to be at best connected by a family similarity, if at all.⁶⁰ If all judgements of beauty were reducible, a theory of beauty could only differentiate between their different meanings. If it then would suggest that we should avoid speaking about beauty and use instead the respective synonyms, this would not impoverish our means of expression. It would rather lead to conceptual clarity and precision.

If, however, some judgements of beauty are irreducible, this procedure would impoverish our means of expression. In the case of an irreducible judgement of beauty, speaking about beauty cannot be replaced by using another term without loss of meaning because we can only or best express what we want to express by saying “x is beautiful”. This does not mean that irreducible judgements of beauty cannot be analysed or explained at all. For example, part of the meaning of an irreducible judgement of beauty might be that the object in question is pleasant. The point is that this does not exhaust its whole meaning. Irreducible judgements should therefore not be treated as or confused with reducible judgements.

But why should one assume that some judgements of beauty are irreducible? The recent aesthetic debate does not pay much attention to beauty. Beauty has lost its predominant position. Perhaps, aesthetics has learned

⁵⁹ See Beardsley (1962), pp. 623-624. Wittgenstein (1968, p. 20), e.g., comes to such a conclusion.

⁶⁰ Wittgenstein (1979) hints at such a conclusion.

its lesson and has understood that “beauty” is an uninterestingly vague or simply muddled concept, which is superfluous in the end, and therefore does not discuss it anymore. But this is neither the only nor the best explanation why contemporary aesthetics lost its interest in beauty. Aesthetics nowadays mostly concentrates on art philosophical questions. It is sometimes even defined as mere art philosophy.⁶¹ And attempts to define art or to explain the value of works of art in terms of beauty got out of style because works of art, especially, contemporary works of art do not aim at beauty.⁶² Contemporary aesthetics does not think much about beauty because beauty does not play a prominent role in art, and not because the concept of beauty is proved to be superfluous.

Professional art criticism set aside, we often speak about beauty. And even if we sometimes could express ourselves equally effectively and precisely without speaking about beauty, it is a rather strong assumption that we could always forgo speaking about beauty. Furthermore, it is remarkable that philosophers have tried to elaborate theories of beauty (nearly) at all times. This enduring interest in judgements of beauty can be best explained in my opinion if some judgements of beauty are irreducible. They fascinate philosophically because it is a challenge to grasp and to explain their full meaning.⁶³ One can thus assume that some judgements of beauty are irreducible. If so, they should be distinguished from reducible ones.

According to P_3^{IR} , one loses the means to distinguish irreducible from reducible judgements of beauty if one rejects the sensory-dependence-thesis. This premise is inspired by Burke’s and Danto’s remarks. It is not an unreasonable assumption that beauty can be explained in terms of attractiveness, especially, if one thinks about human beauty. A person’s attractiveness can depend on her mere sense-perceptual features like her visual appearance, the sound of her voice, or her smell, but also on her non-sense-perceptual features like her character traits or intellectual abilities. If I simply call someone attractive, it is not clear whether her attractiveness depends wholly, or partly, or not at all on her sense-perceptual features. Some judgements of human beauty resist to be analysed in terms of attractiveness just because of this. Speaking about attractiveness can-

⁶¹ See, e.g., Beardsley (1981), p. 4; Binkley (1977), p. 267.

⁶² See, e.g., Danto (2003); Nehamas (2007); Tatarkiewicz (1972), p. 177.

⁶³ For a similar idea, see Mothersill (1984), p. 11.

not capture the sensory dependence of beauty. If we could not express this, this would impoverish our means of expression, especially, because no other equally well-established concept other than beauty exists that highlights sensory dependence and has more or less the same meaning. So the irreducibility of these judgements of beauty has to be preserved. If one rejects the sensory-dependence-thesis, however, one cannot differentiate these apparently irreducible judgements of beauty from reducible ones, and would hence impoverish our means of expression.

To generalise this idea, think of all the synonyms of beauty, which are discussed: “attractiveness,” “agreeableness,” “artistically goodness,” “usefulness,” “perfection,” and so on. None of these synonyms bears a direct connection to the sensory realm. Non-sense-perceptual features and objects can be attractive, agreeable, artistically good, useful, perfect, and so on. If one gives up the sensory-dependence-thesis, the same is true for beauty, and hence it does not speak against an equation, although other reasons might speak against it. In the case of some judgements of beauty, however, what makes them irreducible is exactly that one wants to point out the sensory dependence. Because of this, none of these synonyms can capture the full meaning of these judgements. If one rejects the sensory-dependence-thesis, one cannot explain why this is the case. If, however, one accepts the sensory-dependence-thesis, this explains why they are irreducible and why the proposed synonyms can only capture part of their meanings. They cannot convey the sensory dependence of beauty. No matter whether one tries to analyse beauty primarily in terms of agreeableness, attractiveness, artistically goodness, perfection, and so on, if one gives up the sensory-dependence-thesis, one loses one’s means to point to the sensory dependence. If so, one impoverishes our means of expression, which a theory of beauty should avoid.

If one pursues this line of thought and keeps in mind that the extended sensory-dependence-thesis has been rejected, this provides another reason to give up the sometimes-made equation between judgements of beauty and judgements of aesthetic or artistic success. Neither aesthetic, nor artistic merit does have to depend on sensory properties, but beauty has to, as I have just argued.⁶⁴ To distinguish beauty from aesthetic and artistic

⁶⁴ See also Beardsley (1962), p. 635.

success leads to further conceptual clarity.⁶⁵ And the sensory-dependence-thesis at least partly justifies this distinction. As already emphasised, conceptual clarity and precision is a major aim of a theory of beauty.

6. Conclusion

This paper has raised the question whether one should accept the sensory-dependence-thesis. It has aimed to answer this question metatheoretically, not drawing on assumptions only acceptable for representatives of one specific elaborated theory of beauty because the sensory-dependence-thesis can influence what kind of theory of beauty one formulates and/or whether one approves of, rejects, or restricts an elaborated theory of beauty. This article has accepted Gaut's challenge that the burden of proof rests with the defenders of the thesis. The first argument has tried to deduce the sensory-dependence-thesis from the immediacy of judgements of beauty. But a temporal and an epistemic interpretation of "immediate" does not allow to claim that all judgements of beauty can be made immediately, and a logical interpretation not that judgements of beauty have to depend on immediate, that is, non-inferentially accessible properties. That is why the argument of immediacy fails. The argument of the acquaintance principle fails because the acquaintance principle can be defended without defending the sensory-dependence-thesis. Thus the sensory-dependence-thesis cannot provide the best explanation for the principle. The etymological argument has to be rejected because it rests on the extended sensory-dependence-thesis. Not all properties, which contemporary aesthetics treats as aesthetic, depend on sensory properties. The argument of irreducibility, in contrast, provides a good metatheoretical reason to defend the sensory-dependence-thesis. It argues that theories of beauty should not impoverish our means of expression. Rejecting the sensory-dependence-thesis, however, would confine the richness and precision of our means of expression. In the end, this article defends the sensory-dependence-thesis. It has not elaborated or defended any particular theory of beauty, though. This task is set next.

⁶⁵ See also Danto (2003), p. 58.

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