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*Expressiveness, Ineffability, and Comparisons**

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ABSTRACT. The basic claim of the thesis of ineffability is that works of art possess expressive qualities that cannot be captured by literal language, or that they cannot be captured by any language at all, literal or nonliteral.

The distinction between descriptive (or semantic) and communicative effability (after Kennick) seemed to provide a solution and conceded a practical power to comparisons (and other kinds of indirect descriptions) in order to communicate about expressive qualities or nuances. On the other hand, many scholars (Spackman and Roholt, for example) have conceded that expressive qualities can be captured *demonstratively* by means of predicative expressions involving demonstrative concepts, even if they remain nonetheless *descriptively* (or *semantically*) ineffable. Both seem to accept at the same time that comparisons are implicitly demonstrative.

Comparisons become a watchtower in order to adopt a right approach concerning expressivity, meaning and understanding in art. The effort to support the option of a communicative effability allows us to slip out of a reductionist view about the role of comparisons and therefore about expressiveness. Nevertheless, the predominant way of approaching the question of ineffability in contemporary analytic aesthetics is upheld by the obsessive idea of *capturing* (in terms of a *semantic* comprehensive ambition, very common in cognitivist approaches). That obsession disappears when we think in terms of a view based on Wittgensteinian *aspects*, or in general from more contextualist approaches (such as De Clercq's *kinds of awareness*).

The ineffability of the expressive qualities of works of art has been a central topic in aesthetics since the emergence of analytic aesthetics at the end of the 50's. Contemporary debate has flourished specially in the domain of

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the aesthetics of music, and the influence of Wittgenstein's ideas has been crucial in this regard. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the conclusions may concern arts in general, and not only music.

The basic claim of the thesis of ineffability is that works of art possess expressive qualities that cannot be captured by literal language, or cannot be captured by any type of language at all, whether it be literal or nonliteral (following Spackman's definition, Spackman, 2012, p. 304). Some theorists underline ineffability as a substantial source of value in the arts.

Different ways of solving this matter (or different ways of clarification at least), have been proposed in the tradition of analytic aesthetics. The recent papers by Spackman, Roholt, Raffman or De Clercq are no more than the tip of the iceberg in a contemporary debate enriched firstly by the contributions of Prall, Langer, Dewey or Kennick, and also, more recently, by Stephen Davies, David Cooper, Roger Scruton, Jerrold Levinson, Arthur Danto or Malcolm Budd.

On the one hand, the Wittgensteinian distinction between direct descriptions and indirect descriptions (Kennick, 1961) seemed to provide a solution to this question. Direct description is essentially *naming*, while indirect description involves the characterization of the circumstances and context in which a feeling is experienced or can even be a proposal of re-contextualization (more or less partial) of that experience. Often indirect description is more effective in order to depict a particular and subtle feeling. Wittgenstein noted that an indirect description the kind one finds in a novel ("It was a small rickety table decorated in Moorish style, the sort that is used for smoker's requisites") serves incomparably better to bring a vivid image of the table than a direct description giving exactly the shape, dimensions and so forth (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 181).

Comparisons (often involving metaphor) are commonly recognized as a relevant kind of indirect description. Borrowing Wittgenstein's example: "The chord with which that slow movement [of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony] opens is the colour of that sky' (pointing out of the window)" (Rhees, 1981, p. 130). Or in Spackman's example: "we could capture the expressive quality of the beginning of the Brahms sextet by saying it is the same kind of yearning as that expressed by, say, a passage from a certain Schubert quartet" (Spackman, 2012, p. 311). The comparison often combines different media, as in another famous example of Wittgenstein: "I often

found that certain themes of Brahms were extremely Kellerian” (referring to Gottfried Keller, the Swiss poet and writer) (Wittgenstein, 1978, p. 32).

Then, different kinds of indirect descriptions (such as comparisons, paradigmatically) provide a way to avoid “the traditional ineffability claim” which, after Kennick, can be found in versions by Dewey, Langer or Prall. Certainly, comparisons give us something to say in order to communicate a particular feeling or image to someone, and something to say in literal language (rather than gestures, pointing to, etc). It would strongly satisfy the anti-ineffabilist proponent, even though he would resist accepting that it really “captures” some expressive qualities of the work.

Concurrently, the distinction between descriptive (or semantic) effability and communicative effability (following Spackman, 2012, p. 304) allows us to concede a practical power to comparisons (and other kinds of indirect descriptions) in order to communicate expressive qualities or nuances (fine-grained variations within basic musical categories) with another musician (for example), even if we are skeptical about the possibility of capturing expressive qualities in emotional terms (such as ‘anguished’ ‘yearning’, ‘melancholic’, etc.) or in formal terms (such as tonal or chromatic transitions corresponding to very precise expressive effects).

Descriptive (or semantic) effability implies that we are able to capture an experience or an item of knowledge by the meaning of some words. Communicative effability implies that we are able to convey it to other by means of words. Although most theorists defending the ineffability claim often presuppose that both notions run together, we are not forced to accept communicative ineffability after having accepted a version of semantic ineffability, even if this version is very strong. And all this works without needing to go beyond the limits of literal language.

Comparisons would be successfully used in order to communicate an expressive feature of a musical passage, for example. A good friend (and a good clarinet professor also) told me how difficult it was for him to explain to his students that a *piano* indication in the score does not mean the player ceasing to project the sound to the audience’s ears. After very technical advice, he resorted to the comparison with the theatrical resource of the aside, and he even used real examples of theater asides in order to make his students understand the comparison. Naturally, the success of communicative effability would be proved by the fact that the student is now able

to play the passage of music with a projected *piano*, even though the only thing that the professor can do to fulfill the claim of descriptive effability is to repeat the technical instructions previously intended (“open the throat while keeping the column of breath tense”, for example). In these kinds of examples, the limits of literal language are challenged by the fact that we are really tempted to point to the second term of the comparison rather than to trying to capture again in descriptive words the content of the feature.

On the other hand, many scholars (Spackman, 2012, after McDowell, and Roholt, 2010, for example) have conceded that expressive qualities can be captured *demonstratively* by means of predicative expressions involving demonstrative concepts (such as ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘now’, ‘here’, ‘there’, and so on), even if they nonetheless remain *descriptively* (or *semantically*) ineffable.

For Spackman, the expressive qualities of the artworks are (if not uniquely, at least potentially¹) strongly fine-grained ones, and then they are more specific than any description comprising a set of emotional terms (such as, for example, “anguished yearning”, “hopefully yearning”, etc.). An alternative means of description is that of demonstrative formulas.

Even if an expression like ‘that expressive quality’ can adequately capture the emotion conveyed by the Brahms sextet discussed earlier, it is nonetheless clear that these words do not offer us any *descriptive* purchase on the expressive quality we perceive. (Spackman, 2012, p. 310)

Both Roholt and Spackman seem to accept at the same time that comparisons are implicitly demonstrative: comparisons say in effect, “*this* expressive quality is the same as *that* expressive quality”. Consequently, comparisons could not actually be descriptive alternatives to demonstratives in order to capture expressive qualities, but equivalent in meaning to these demonstratives.

Roholt’s strategy consists, in fact, of arguing that there is a type of description able to render musical nuances “effable enough for practical

¹ Spackman 2012, p. 308-309: “And it may thus be the case that some works express nuances of emotion that are different from the emotions expressed by any other actual works”.

purposes”. The kind of things that Roholt has in mind, speaking of nuances, is that: “A musical nuance is typically defined as a note performed slightly early or late in time (music theorists and cognitive psychologists prefer the term ‘expressive variation’).” (Roholt, 2010, p. 1)

Let Spackman explain Roholt’s claim:

The descriptions he has in mind are *comparisons*, often themselves involving metaphor, to the nuances in other works and performances, as when a musician says, ‘The brightness I have in mind is a brightness just like the one *so-and-so* achieved on the recording of *that* song.’² Such descriptions make nuances practically effable in the sense that they allow musicians to effectively communicate about them. In a similar way, it might be suggested that we could capture the expressive quality of the beginning of the Brahms sextet by saying it is the same kind of yearning as that expressed by, say, a passage from a certain Schubert quartet. If not all expressive qualities are uniquely fine-grained, it is theoretically possible that in some cases we could specify the expressive quality of a work by pointing to another instance of the same quality in another work. But notice, as is revealed in Roholt’s formulation above, that descriptions of this kind are implicitly demonstrative: they say, in effect, ‘*this* expressive quality is the same as *that* expressive quality.’ For this reason, such expressions are not actually descriptive alternatives to the demonstratives that I have argued can capture expressive qualities; they are actually equivalent in meaning to these demonstratives. (Spackman, 2012, pp. 311-312)

Spackman goes beyond dealing with the limitation of the power of comparisons: he thinks that there will be many expressive qualities that cannot be exactly captured by any such comparative descriptions for “the expressive qualities of different works have at least the potential to depend quite closely on the different formal features of those works” and then “it would be difficult to find, for many expressive qualities, another musical passage that has *exactly* [my italics] the same set of emotional resonances” (Spackman, 2012, p. 312). Furthermore, Spackman thinks that there are expressive qualities that are strongly fine-grained and that this is a good argument in favor of the thesis of descriptive ineffability.

² Spackman quotes Roholt, 2010, p. 6.

Additionally, Spackman, in order to reinforce his strategy to limit the capacity of comparisons (or comparative descriptions) to capture expressive qualities, tries to bring on his side Roholt's thesis about nuances: "Roholt may in fact concede an analogous point about nuances by saying only that comparative descriptions render nuances 'effable enough'" (Spackman, 2012, p. 312). But actually Roholt was speaking about "effable enough" relating to what Roholt judges to be the really relevant objectives for effability: nonstructural objectives. "The explananda of an account of musical nuance should be the raised or lowered pitches and early or late notes *as they are perceived in their musical contexts.*" (Roholt, 2010, p. 7). A rock composer envisions not merely a certain rhythm (which is a matter of structure) but a certain *groove* (which is the *feel* of a rhythm, a nonstructural objective). And it is there where indirect description, including metaphor and comparison, render these musical nuances "effable enough" for practical purposes. Roholt's view actually underlines the practical and contextual elements.

I quote Roholt's paper:

Rock musicians (and other musicians, of course) share a fine-tuned familiarity with a large number of recordings; by referring to these recordings, they add *comparisons* to indirect descriptions. They often begin with an indirect description and then, in order to add specificity, refer to an example: 'the brightness I have in mind is a brightness just like the one *so-and-so* achieved on the recording of *that* song.' A composer may say to a drummer, about a target groove, 'Lean the beat forward □ not like the recorded version of The Beatles' «I Saw Her Standing There» but like the Washington, D.C., live performance of the song from 1964.'" By adding a comparison to indirect description we have added a degree of specificity to our ability to communicate about nonstructural nuance objectives. In this case, musical nuances are effable enough for the practical purposes of rock musicians, and I suspect, through similar devices, for the practical purposes of musicians in general. After all, musicians do manage to communicate about nuances. Thus, ineffability seems to be relative to the task at hand, and as far as the perceptually rich, practical task considered above, nuances are effable enough. (Roholt, 2010, p. 6)

In fact, Roholt's strategy works in favor of a contextualist or pragmatist

claim, while Spackman's strategy (gobbling Roholt's up, in a way) is ultimately devoted to claim for ineffability as an important source of the value of art, in line with an old (and even contemporary) topic of discussion. I quote Spackman's article:

I have suggested that while, contrary to the claims of the traditional theorists, expressive qualities are not strictly ineffable since they can be grasped by demonstratives, they are nonetheless descriptively ineffable, and this admission may indeed preserve a good deal of the spirit of the traditional claims. Even if this view is accepted, however, it might be held that the traditional thinkers were wrong to maintain that this ineffability was an important source of the value of art. I want to conclude by suggesting why this charge seems mistaken. (Spackman, 2012, p. 312)

The topic of the source of the value of art related to the ineffability would divert me from the right direction in this paper.

The relevant thing here, for me, is that the pragmatist and contextualist framework which is really adequate for those kinds of indirect descriptions (as comparisons, paradigmatically) points in the right direction in order to find a solution to the question of ineffability in art. The alternative view appears in its revealing power when we try to explain the meaning of musical understanding in terms of "hearing something (a chord, a rhythm, a tune) endowed with expression" (Marrades, 2005, p. 11. Translation mine, hereinafter): it "involves being able to listen to it as probable points of intersection between music and life, and there sounds are connected with other elements of the listener's accumulated experience", but at the same time "musical expression depends on the way of that connection, it is the way a musical motif fits in a particular setting or environment of experience".

Of course, that "setting or environment of experience" involves a role of the audience in which perception, imagination and judgement are interwoven in multiple ways, and in which "a change of expression following the dawning of a new aspect in a musical theme depends not only on the training of the listener, but also on the fantasy of the player and of the listener" (Marrades, 2005, p. 11).

In short, comparisons become a watchtower in order to adopt a better approach concerning expressivity, meaning and understanding in art. The effort to get away from the option of a descriptive effability and to support the option of a (more operative) communicative effability allows us to slip out of a reductionist view about the role of comparisons and therefore about the working of expression in art. And all this may be said without forgetting the huge range of forms and uses that comparisons can adopt in artistic and aesthetic language games.

Spackman emphasizes ineffability as a guarantee of the inexhaustible richness of the emotional power of the work of art. I prefer to put the emphasis on effability (rather than on ineffability) in order to explain the inexhaustible richness and value of the work of art.

My main criticism of the predominant way of approaching the question of ineffability in contemporary analytic aesthetics is that it has been ballasted by an obsessive idea: the idea of *capturing* (in terms of a *semantic* comprehensive ambition, very common in cognitivist approaches). That obsession disappears when we think about *capturing* the expression in terms of a view based on aspects (in line with Wittgenstein's ideas again), or in general from more contextualist approaches to understanding in art (such as Rafael De Clercq's explanation of aesthetic ineffability based on different kinds of awareness or attention [De Clercq, 2000], for example). I will show this through the analysis of varied examples concerning the relationship between different artistic media.

From an approach based on aspects, comparisons are not the only kind of "seeing as" or "listening as", and neither are they the only kind of aspect, but they have a paradigmatic role to play in order to underline two essential features of expressivity and understanding in art: one, the imaginative attitude of the audience, and two, the relevance of context (in a broad sense) in the actual working of expression.

If we conceive the comparison, in the framework of the approach from a theory of aspects, as a trial to activate the capacity of a listener to connect his perception of sounds with other aspects of his experience, that is, a trial to activate his capacity to fit a musical motif in a particular environment of experience, then the mystery of the attribution of expression to an artistic object (the attribution of melancholy to a Schubert's piece, for example) vanishes, and a path is opened between the Scylla and Charybdis

of externalist and internalist approaches.

I quote Julián Marrades:

We are not talking about us projecting a conceptual or experiential content towards the sounds. But to conceive the expression as something immanent in the sounds does not imply either a reduction in the expression to intrinsic properties of the sound materials independent of the musical experience. It may occur that someone perceives the sound properties in a piece by Schubert, the pitch, intensity and timber of those sounds, the tonality, the intervals, the chords, etc. and in spite of all that, the piece tells him nothing at all. We say that such a person lacks an ear for music. It is not a physiological defect, but an inability to perceive intentional aspects in the sounds, an inability to hear [or to listen to] the sound as music. (Marrades, 2005, pp. 11-12. Translation mine.)

Of course, to propose a comparison such as “Compare the brief chorus of Bach’s *Passion* with the meaning of the brief scenes in some works of Shakespeare” (I borrow Wittgenstein’s example) can become the trigger of a process of aspect dawning, but it can also *fall on deaf ears* for my conversational partner, even if comparisons are just a particular kind of *seeing as* strategy.

What has been “captured” by my comparison if my partner has achieved listening with meaning to Bach’s brief chorus? Does it really matter to find in Shakespeare’s brief scenes “exactly the same set of emotional (or cognitive) resonances” which guarantee that “*this* expressive quality is the same as *that* expressive quality”? I think it would be better to underline the fact that I try to take advantage of my knowledge that he or she is a fan of Shakespeare’s dramas although Bach’s *Passion* seems quite boring to him, or that he or she insists again on pushing the forward button of his sound system every time that a brief chorus arrives.

The contextual element has been rarely remarked upon even in very famous Wittgensteinian examples. In fact, the idea of indirect description is borrowed by Kennick from Wittgenstein who, in *The Brown Book* considers the feeling or experience of familiarity just before the example of the table decorated in Moorish style. I quote Wittgenstein:

Different experiences of familiarity: a) Someone enters my room. I haven't seen him for a long time, and didn't expect him. I look at him, say or feel 'oh, it's you?' □ Why did I in giving this example say that I hadn't seen the man for a long time? Wasn't I setting out to describe *experiences* of familiarity? And whatever the experience was I alluded to, couldn't I have had it even if I had seen the man half an hour ago? I mean, I gave the circumstances of recognizing the man as a means to the end of describing the precise situation of the recognition. (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 181)

Roholt is very clearheaded remarking that the relevance of context is here outside the experience ("in order to correctly describe a *particular* experience of familiarity") in the same way that the relevance of context is embedded in the relationship proposed in an indirect description and even in the proper link of similarity (or resemblance) constituting the experience of familiarity. I quote Roholt:

Wittgenstein points out that there are different experiences of familiarity. (To anticipate where I am going with this, note the analogy between different experiences of familiarity and different F-sharps.) Wittgenstein claims that in order to correctly describe a *particular* experience of familiarity, we must describe the circumstances or context. (Roholt, 2010, p. 3)

The way of escaping from the obsession with "capturing" the essence of the expression is, for Roholt, the claim for nonstructural objectives of minute variations (or nuances) in music. For Spackman, that role is played by the emphasis (again) on descriptive ineffability, while he concedes at least the possibility of a communicative effability.

An alternative claim for ineffability founded on a very different tradition (Michael Polanyi's theory of attention) has been defended by Rafael De Clercq. I would think about it as a third kind of way of escaping from the "capture obsession". For De Clercq, Polanyi's distinction between subsidiary (or instrumental) attention and focal (or integrated) attention is very useful in order to characterize aesthetic experience, to the extent that there "Both the subsidiary and the focal are appreciated in their own right" (De Clercq, 2000, p. 93). It means that "it is impossible to grasp focally

how an aesthetic object acquires its special meaning” because “we can only relate to it in a subsidiary (that is, indirect) manner, through its reflection in a concrete, aesthetic object” (De Clercq, 2000, p. 95). Then “what we cannot articulate is how the bassoon affects the quality of the hole [it is, the symphony] upon which it bears.” (De Clercq, 2000, p. 96)

De Clercq’s paper results in a claim for ineffability, though I would brand it as a *positive* ineffability, to the extent that the attention to the concrete, particular or structural elements is no more conceived in terms of the failure of an obsessive capturing project (that is, “the difficulty of putting into words all nuances of a perceptual and/or aesthetic experience” [De Clercq, 2000, p. 96]). Rather that attention to the particular is conceived as an integrated part of a dynamic and tensional mechanism, as rich as it is complex, which brings the effable and the ineffable closer than ever. And then, no restrictions can be required to the claim for the ineffable side of the aesthetic experience and its importance for human beings.

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