

Why Choose One When You Can Have Both? On the Perceptual and Rational Dimensions of Aesthetic Judgement

Clara Campuzano Gómez¹

University of Murcia

ABSTRACT. Aesthetic judgements are traditionally deemed to have a perceptual nature. There is an immediate recognition of aesthetic qualities in the objects we appreciate that doesn't seem to require any conscious inference. Accordingly, a perceptual account of aesthetic judgement seems therefore to be at odds with reasoning. Such a tension between its perceptual and rational dimensions takes the form of a dilemma between non-inferentialism and inferentialism, respectively: if we form our judgements by reasoning, there is no explanation of our immediate recognition of aesthetic properties without conscious inference; and if we directly perceive aesthetic qualities, reasoning seems pointless. In this paper I defend that the dilemma isn't such, and both perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement are compatible. The dilemma suggests that, for the non-inferentialist to preserve the perceptual, immediately motivated character of judgement, it ought to give up reasoning. In opposition, I suggest that perceptually based accounts of aesthetic judgement can account for a non-inferential structure of reasoning, neither to be dissociated from the perceptual exercise of taste, nor from evaluation itself.

1. Introduction

This paper is focused on the debate between perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement. The use of both labels is instantiated by ordinary descriptions of our judging: on

¹ cisabel.campuzano@um.es

the one hand, it is said that we *hear* the sorrow of a song, *see* a dance movement as graceful, and *perceive* the balance of a painting; on the other, we are also said to *infer* the meaning of a symbol, *reason* our way through the interpretation of a theme, and recognise the balance of a painting *based on* the symmetry of its elements. What separates both kinds of descriptions is determined by what we take as the ground for our aesthetic judgements: the former are based on perception, while the latter are achieved by means of reasoning and inferring. The idea of perception as involved in our aesthetic judgements has a long history, but it is generally associated with Frank Sibley as its most noteworthy example². Aesthetics, according to him, ‘deals with a kind of perception’³, which seems to be the reason why our judgements cannot be ‘the outcome of considering reasons, however good’⁴. On this regard, Sibley also claims: ‘It is absurd to ask that an aesthetic judgement (involving, as it does, perception) be based upon reasons [for concluding or inferring that the work is graceful]’⁵. These well-known quotes from Sibley are often read first and foremost as (i) a defence for non-inferentialism, but also as (ii) a rejection of the role of reasoning in aesthetics and, more importantly, as (ii) the outset of an opposition between perception and rationality. In this paper I aim to follow Sibley’s non-inferentialism while rejecting (ii) and (iii).

As a response to Sibley’s view, some of the efforts⁶ at making room for rationality in aesthetics are not only committed to vindicate the part that reasoning plays in appreciation, but also to challenge the long-standing tradition of perceptually based aesthetic judgements. On this regard, the main objection non-inferentialism faces comes from inferentialism about aesthetic judgements: if our access to or ascription of aesthetic properties were grounded in perception, instead of in conscious inferences, there would be no explanation of what Fabian Dorsch called ‘the practice of backing up’⁷ our aesthetic opinions by pointing to non-aesthetic ones. According to him, ‘the availability of, and need for, additional support in the shape of the reference to relevant lower-level features becomes problematic’⁸ for Sibley-like positions. To put it briefly, it is argued that non-inferentialism cannot account for reasoning/justification in aesthetics.

2 For a reference to the central spot that Sibley has on the debate, see Dorsch (2013) and Cavedon-Taylor (2017).

3 Sibley, F. (2001), p. 34.

4 Ibid., p. 40.

5 Ibid., p. 42.

6 With some red-letter exceptions, such as the work of Keren Gorodeisky, with whom this paper aims to side. See, for instance, Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018), Gorodeisky (2018, 2022).

7 Dorsch (2013), p. 660.

8 Ibid., p. 661.

This conclusion is far from harmless to any theory of aesthetic evaluation: if not by supporting and justifying our aesthetic claims, it is hard to make sense of our critical discourse, as well as most of our conversations and arguments about art or any other aesthetic matter. The pending question is: if the sole source of aesthetic justification is first-hand perception of higher-level properties, instead of inferential reasonings from its underlying lower-level ones, can our aesthetic judgements be rationally justified?

The structure of this paper goes as follows. Section 2 analyses the debate between perception and rationality. Section 3 sheds light on two key assumptions, without which the opposition and mismatch between perception and rationality don't hold. The last part of this paper, Section 4, questions the inferentialist challenge of aesthetic justification and motivates the virtues of a non-inferentialist account of reasoning in the aesthetic domain.

2. The Debate

In his essay 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', Sibley famously writes:

But an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called *reasoning*. I may have reasons for thinking something is graceful, but not reasons for seeing it is. Yet aesthetic perception, I have said, is essential to aesthetic judgement; one could not therefore be brought to make an aesthetic judgement simply as the outcome of considering reasons, however good. It is a confusion of disparate activities to suppose that in this sense one could have a 'rational justification' for making an aesthetic judgement. Thus the aesthetic judgements I am concerned with can neither *have* nor *lack* a rational basis in this sense, namely, that they can either be or fail to be the outcome of good or bad reasoning⁹.

This passage (or at least some part of it) is often quoted as a sample of Sibley's view, as well as a piece of evidence of the opposition between perception and rationality in Aesthetics.

Contra Sibley, it is argued that 'an awareness that an object has such-and-such non-aesthetic properties suffices to demonstrate that one is justified in judging that it has such-and-such an

⁹ Sibley (2001), p. 40.

aesthetic property'¹⁰. In other words, recognising the symmetry of a painting's elements makes an ascription of balance justified and well-supported. According to this view, pointing to non-aesthetic properties wouldn't only explain the ontological presence (or absence) of aesthetic ones, but also and foremost it would ground evidentially our aesthetic judgements, as well as strengthen our epistemic trust as critics¹¹. On this basis, it is formulated what Cavedon-Taylor calls 'the challenge from critical-ostention': 'we frequently do, in the context of justifying our aesthetic judgements, [...] *ostend* the non-aesthetic properties upon which the attributed aesthetic property is believed to depend'¹². This method of supporting and justifying our aesthetic claims wouldn't be neither 'rare nor intelligible'¹³, yet the non-inferentialist is said to attribute such acts of critical-ostention any role of justification or any convincing power to demonstrate how well-founded they are or to motivate others to revise their judgements. Importantly, what we are dealing with here is an idea of justification by which the ascription of an aesthetic property rests on the recognition of the non-aesthetic ones to which the former depend.

Of course, this is partially motivated by and derived from the relationship of dependence between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties: since the realisation of the former depends on the presence of the latter, balance in a painting may be explained by the underlying symmetry of its elements. But in contrast with Sibley, Dorsch and Cavedon-Taylor attribute a normative purport to the ontological dependence between the two kinds of properties: supporting and justifying our aesthetic judgements is thus a matter of referring to lower-level features of which aesthetic ones depend.

This line of criticism is led by Fabian Dorsch (2013, 2014) and Dan Cavedon-Taylor (2017). According to Dorsch, there's an opposition at the core of aesthetic appreciation: on the one hand, our judgements seem to be immediately motivated, 'formed in some way other than rationally responding to the consideration of reasons for or against forming them'¹⁴, that is, 'in a non-inferential way'¹⁵; on the other, their acquisition and justification often require some sort of deliberation and reasoning, from certain lower-level properties to the aesthetic, higher-level

10 Cavedon-Taylor (2017), pp. 4-5.

11 Ibid., p. 674.

12 Cavedon-Taylor (2017), p. 4.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 661-662.

ones they realise. The motivation of (some of) our aesthetic judgements, Dorsch admits, such as the recognition of the gaudiness of a painting, the unity of a set of furniture or the elegance of a poem line, is immediate. They are not thus the response to certain reasons nor the conclusion of conscious inferences. But if someone were to cast doubts on our ascription of gaudiness to a painting, ‘we would draw his attention to the colour scheme of the work; [and] if he disagrees with us about the unity of the furniture, we would point out to him his relative proportionality in similarity in design; and if he rejects our statement about the elegance of the poem, we ask him to listen (really or imaginatively) to its recital and notice its sound qualities’¹⁶. Such tension, between a non-mediated access to aesthetic properties and an inferentially mediated justification of those by reference to non-aesthetic ones, is framed as a dilemma by Dorsch:

- i. either we directly perceive aesthetic properties (without any conscious inference), and therefore reasoning and justifying are pointless,
- ii. or we reason our way through aesthetic properties and thus there is no explanation of our immediately motivated judgements (that is, of our non-mediated perception of aesthetic properties).

The dilemma, thus, acquires the form of a debate between inferentialism and non-inferentialism:

- i. either we form our aesthetic judgements non-inferentially, which rules out the possibility of reasoning and leaves unaccounted our pointing to non-aesthetic, lower-level properties as additional support for aesthetic, higher-level ones.
- ii. or our aesthetic judgements are justified inferentially, and therefore our immediately motivated recognition of aesthetic qualities requires an alternative explanation.

Hence, perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement seem incompatible: for one, defending aesthetic judgement’s perceptual nature seems to come at the expense of giving up rationality, whereas deeming reasoning as a suitable ground for judging appears to be at odds with the kind of perception involved in appreciation. Within the framework of this dilemma, inferentialism ought to explain our immediately motivated judgements by other means than

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 661.

conscious inferences from non-aesthetic properties, whereas non-inferentialism is challenged by an agreed-upon idea of justification, which occupies Section 4. But before moving to question the challenge of aesthetic justification, Section 3 aims to examine two assumptions without which the dilemma between perception and aesthetic rationality doesn't seem to hold.

3. A Dilemma?

The dilemma between perception as the sole ground of our aesthetic judgements and our practice of 'backing up' and justifying our aesthetic claims only holds if we assume:

A1: Reasoning is always inferential

A2: Perception comes in isolation

Let's consider first A₁. As noted in Section 2, the inferentialist maintains that aesthetic judgements (e.g. 'that painting is balanced') are justified by pointing to its underlying non-aesthetic properties. Thus, reasoning our way through aesthetic judgements is often identified with the inference of aesthetic properties on the basis of non-aesthetic ones, on which the former depend, just as one infers the conclusion of an argument from a set of premises. Here the notion of reason at use means, '[...] roughly, a true statement or a fact such that, on the basis of knowing it, it would be reasonable, right, or plausible to infer, suppose, or believe that something is so'¹⁷. Since this notion of reason allows the formation of aesthetic judgements as the output of inferential reasonings, one may judge a painting to be balanced without actually perceiving it. This also presupposes a general link between reasonings and verdict, between non-aesthetic properties and aesthetic ones. But such generality is dubious: neither the presence (or absence) of certain non-aesthetic properties guarantees the presence (or absence) of aesthetic ones, nor the recognition of the former justifies the attribution of the latter. According to Sibley, 'one poem has strength and power because of the regularity of its metre and rhyme; another is monotonous and lacks drive and strength because of its regular metre and rhyme. We do not feel the need to switch from 'because of' to 'in spite of'¹⁸. Here it is important to differentiate two senses of reason: (i) reason why P has strength and power and (ii) reason for inferring its

¹⁷ See Sibley (2001), p. 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

strength and power. Non-inferentialism doesn't thus deny the importance of referring to non-aesthetic properties to explain how an aesthetic one was realised but instead rejects the possibility to make aesthetic judgements by other means than perception. And the reason behind this isn't that one can get to the conclusion without going through the antecedent; it is the inferential structure of reasoning what the non-inferentialist gives up.

Critical activity isn't therefore concerned with giving reasons for inferring or believing, not even reasons for seeing. Instead, the kind of critical support given by the critic in order to justify their aesthetic claims has to do with giving reasons why W has such-and-such aesthetic properties, reasons for appreciation, and reasons why W is worth-appreciating. What I aim to defend here is that non-inferentialism about aesthetic judgement doesn't need to give up rationality in order to reject the inferential access of aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic ones. And, more importantly, that a non-inferential account of reasoning and justification is not only possible but preferable to grasp the mechanics of perceptual learning and aesthetic expertise.

The second assumption (A₂) is that aesthetic properties are perceived in isolation. One of the main objections non-inferentialism faces has to do with an alleged impossibility to account for the epistemic support that non-aesthetic properties bring to aesthetic ones. It is important to note, on the contrary, that directly perceiving the balance of a painting doesn't mean perceiving only that: *seeing* or *hearing* certain evaluative properties such as the balance of a painting or the gracefulness of certain dance movements doesn't mean that seeing and hearing the underlying non-evaluative ones is dispensable, neither this implies a neglect of the responsibility that the latter have on the emergence of the former. We recognize aesthetic qualities instead *as being realized by* its underlying non-aesthetic ones, on the one hand, and by many other aspects and events of the work of art and its artworld, on the other. This argument isn't exclusive of aesthetic perception; it can be easily illustrated by the following example from ordinary perception. Consider the highly expressive interpretation of Daniel's Kaluuya in the movie *Get Out*. Our direct perception of the horror and despair expressed by his character doesn't mean our unaccountability in perceiving his tears or the redness of his eyes, nor our immediate recognition of his expression of mistrust means an unaccountability in perceiving his frowning. Similarly, perceptual access to aesthetic qualities doesn't imply that other features of the artwork, either lower or higher-level ones, the context (of production and appreciation), and other aspects of the artworld that surrounds it aren't also perceived nor play a major role in our aesthetic experience. In fact, the only reason why someone is able to directly perceive certain

aesthetic properties is because she also perceived other many things, which are not to be understood as the support of higher-level qualities, but as part of the whole pack of features and events that *realize* it.

But what's the difference between "support" and "realize" here? I would like to argue that it's not a terminological issue, but a phenomenological one. We directly perceive high-level features, but not *with* the support of lower-level ones, as the inferentialist would claim, nor *without* it, as the inferentialist would object to Sibley-like positions. We recognize aesthetic qualities instead *as being realized by* the non-aesthetic ones that make them emerge, on the one hand, and by many other aspects and events of the work of art and its artworld, on the other. Directly perceiving a line as graceful is not acknowledging the quality of gracefulness in isolation but seeing its gracefulness as being realized by its shape and sinuosity. Thus, non-inferentialism does leave room for the role of pointing to non-aesthetic properties when it comes to justify our aesthetic judgements: not as 'additional support', but in a specifically non-inferential manner, as the realization of our aesthetic predicates.

If my analysis is correct and A₁ and A₂ are wrong, the dilemma between the perceptual and rational dimensions of appreciation is misguided. Consequently, non-inferentialism about aesthetic judgements may still have a chance.

4. Towards a Non-inferentialist Account of Reasoning in Aesthetics

Sibley notes in his essay 'Aesthetic Concepts' that the activity of the critic 'frequently consists in mentioning or pointing out the features, including easily discernible non-aesthetic ones, upon which the aesthetic qualities depend'¹⁹. But in 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', he puts forth the following distinction:

We also saw that critics largely occupy themselves in discovering the reasons why a work is, say, graceful or unbalanced; that someone who has seen that it is graceful must in some degree have noticed these responsible features; and that a good critic should be able to point out these reasons. But these are *reasons why* the work is graceful, and to be

¹⁹ Sibley (2001), p. 15.

distinguished from *reasons*—good or bad, a critic’s or anyone else’s—*for* concluding or inferring that the work is graceful²⁰.

The point Sibley makes here is that, even though non-aesthetic properties explain why the work has a certain aesthetic quality, the mere presence of the former doesn’t justify the inference of the latter²¹. Behind this idea, there is his main thesis that aesthetic concepts aren’t governed by rules, meaning that no recognition of any set of non-aesthetic properties does guarantee the ascription of aesthetic ones:

The reason the music is sad at a certain point may truly be that just there it slows and drops into a minor key. [...] But knowledge that a piece of music slows and drops into a minor key at a certain point [...] would be very poor reasons for believing or inferring that the music must be, or even probably is, sad. [...] The music might instead be solemn or peaceful, sentimental, or even characterless²².

So, while he agrees that non-aesthetic properties, such as the slows and drops into a minor key in a piece of music, bring about a metaphysical explanation of the realisation of aesthetic ones, such as sadness and solemnity, he denies that they justify epistemically nor ‘support the judgement by permitting inference to its truth’²³. Inferences cannot therefore ground our aesthetic judgements, for even though the critic’s pointing to certain non-aesthetic properties that might have been overlooked is sometimes helpful to see an aesthetic one, it is also usual that, ‘although these *were* seen, the resultant aesthetic quality was still missed’²⁴.

Now, non-inferentialism needs to overcome a twofold challenge: on the one side, it ought to explain why pointing to non-aesthetic properties doesn’t justify our aesthetic judgements, and on the other, an alternative account of justification should be motivated in turn.

The idea of lower-level properties as the justification of our aesthetic judgements is generally assumed as the ‘common ground’ in the debate as well as in the discipline, even a neutral, ‘pre-theoretical point of view’²⁵. Just the same way a judgement that it has rained is only justified if

²⁰ Sibley (2001), p. 42. My own emphasis.

²¹ Dorsch’s interpretation of Sibley accounts here for a distinction between reasons why something possesses an aesthetic quality and reasons for ascribing aesthetic qualities. For the latter, pointing to non-aesthetic features wouldn’t be a reason for ascribing an aesthetic quality, but a reason of its presence. See Dorsch (2013), p. 670.

²² Sibley (2001), p. 43.

²³ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁵ See Dorsch (2013), p. 668.

one perceives the wetness of the street or judges that the street is wet as its evidential ground, a judgement that a painting is balanced would only be justified if one perceives its underlying symmetry or judges the organisation of the painting's elements to be symmetric. Indeed, this idea of justification is properly motivated by and derived from the relationship of dependence between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties: since the realisation of the former depends on the presence of the latter, balance in a painting may be explained by the underlying symmetry of its elements.

As noted above, Sibley would agree on the importance of being able to recognise non-emergent, lower-level properties and the particular way in which they realise emergent, higher-level ones. Yet what would be under dispute is whether merely pointing to non-aesthetic properties really does the job in supporting and justifying our aesthetic judgements.

Given their ontological dependence, the realization of aesthetic properties is *explained* by referring to non-aesthetic ones, to which the critic frequently points. This only becomes problematic when the inferentialist, against Sibley, identifies such referring to non-aesthetic features on which aesthetic ones depend as the *justification* of our aesthetic judgements. My point is that the fact that aesthetic properties are metaphysically explained by non-aesthetic ones doesn't mean that seeing and pointing to the latter guarantees or justifies the ascription of the former. Merely referring to the realisation of higher-level properties by lower-level ones doesn't count as an aesthetic reason to recognise an aesthetic property: for such recognition to be justified, one has to say why the realisation is valuable, worth-appreciating or contributes to or detracts from its aesthetic value²⁶. Critical reasons, I claim, demand more than conscious inferences for the formation and justification of critical judgements. Here I aim to propose a non-inferentialist account of reasoning in aesthetics, the structure of which doesn't put aesthetic reasons before or beyond evaluation, but as part of it. Aesthetic reasons bring about an appreciation and a way of looking that, for someone to accept the reason given by the other, she has to perceive and appreciate it for herself.

There's a kind of critical activity that involves drawing attention to notably responsible features but goes beyond what Cavedon-Taylor calls 'acts of critical-ostention'. It entails, Sibley says,

26 On this regard, see Crawford (1970) and Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018).

‘making similes and comparisons, describing the work in appropriate metaphors, gesticulate aptly, and so on’.

Almost anything [the critic] may do, verbal or non-verbal, can on occasion prove successful. To go on to ask how these methods can possibly succeed is to begin to ask how people can ever be brought to see aesthetic (and Gestalt and other similar) properties at all. [...] Some aestheticians have held that this—showing the work, getting people to see—is the only way of supporting an aesthetic judgement, even perhaps the only point of critical activity. This is to overlook a great deal; but I see no reason why it should not be called a way of supporting or justifying, even of proving, an aesthetic judgement.²⁷

This paper aims to defend that reasoning in aesthetics cannot be dissociated from the exercise of taste nor evaluation itself. Giving reasons for appreciation involves guiding, ‘putting one’s finger on something’ in order to expand, improve or change our experience of an object, genre, style or artform. The structure of this reasoning has therefore a perceptual dimension: we give reasons to ‘get others to taste it there’²⁸, and by doing so, we offer ourselves as appreciative mirrors²⁹, as a guidance for perceptually and rationally based appreciation.

Acknowledgements

21838/FPI/22. Fundación Séneca. Región de Murcia (Spain).

The research for this project was supported by the project “The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic Appreciation and Deliberation” (PID2023-149237NB-I00) funded by the Spanish National Investigation Agency – AEI

²⁷ Sibley (2001), p. 38-9.

²⁸ See Hansen & Adams (2024).

²⁹ See Gorodeisky (2022), p. 328.

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