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AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

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It. *Proprietà estetiche*; Fr. *Propriétés esthétiques*; Germ. *Ästhetische Eigenschaften*; Span. *Propiedades estéticas*. The aesthetic properties of an item, be it a natural or an artificial object, are those qualities denoted by the kind of terms usually employed in aesthetic judgments. Such qualities are usually labelled as tertiary, in order to distinguish them from primary (e.g., mass) and secondary (e.g., colour) properties on which they nonetheless depend. Their assessment calls for a specific kind of sensitivity, a direct acquaintance with an object, although a perceptually, emotionally and cognitively complex experience can be involved as well.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

It should be of no surprise that the topic of aesthetic properties (AP) has been discussed mainly in the field of analytic aesthetics, which was conceived in the first place as a philosophy of art criticism, that is, as an analysis of those terms and sentences used in aesthetic discourses and aimed at assessing the qualities possessed by an item – most notably, an artwork – and at inquiring into their claim to objectivity. The first author to seriously inquire into the nature of AP was Frank Sibley, with a number of seminal papers written in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Sibley (2001a) defines aesthetic concepts (or terms, properties, qualities, attributes, aspects) as “taste concepts” insofar as they call for a special epistemic access, i.e. an aesthetic receptivity, which is quite different from personal preference, and which, although it is possessed by everyone, admits of different levels of refinement. He also gives a list of these concepts and classifies as “aesthetic” such terms as “unified”, “balanced”, “integrated”, “serene”, “powerful”, “delicate”, “moving”, “sentimental”, and so on. Sibley adds that this list is not definitive, since many of them come to be aesthetic terms by a kind of “metaphorical transference”.

With the identification of aesthetic-concepts with taste-concepts, however, Sibley runs the risk of circularity, taste having been defined as “the ability to *notice* or *see* or *tell* that things have certain

qualities”, that is, aesthetic qualities. But he immediately battens down the hatches by introducing a distinction that inspired a lot of interesting reflections in the following years, namely, the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties, the latter comprising those properties of an object which, to be grasped, only require the exercise of our ordinary perceptive and/or intellectual capacities (e.g., shapes, colors, musical notes, words, sentences, and so on). Sibley asserts that the AP of an object (1) are distinct from its non-aesthetic properties and (2) depend on its non-aesthetic properties for their own existence and their specific character (for a critique of Sibley’s distinction, see Cohen 1973). This dependence is objective and causal, but at the same time is of a particular and contingent kind. In fact, “there are no sets of non-aesthetic features that are logically sufficient for it [i.e., for an item] to have a certain aesthetic quality” (Sibley 2001b: 46). For example, a painting could possess all the non-aesthetic properties characteristically associated with “grace” (such as the presence of curving lines or of pastel colours) and nonetheless fail to be “graceful”. This is so because (1) all AP are “regional” properties, that is – as explained by Beardsley (1982: 106) – they are qualities that belong to complexes of parts or relations, rather than to individual elements, and (2) an aesthetic quality is the outcome of a unique combination and interaction of such (non-aesthetic) parts/elements.

The relationship between AP and non-AP was reformulated by Jerrold Levinson as the thesis of supervenience, which maintains that “two objects (e.g., works of art) that differ aesthetically necessarily differ non-aesthetically” (Levinson 1990: 135). By combining such theory with Sibley’s and Beardsley’s previous considerations, Levinson further offered a definition of AP according to which they are “higher-order ways of appearing ... [which] arise out of the lower-order ways of appearing on which they depend in a holistic or emergent manner” (Levinson 2005: 342-343). While accounting for AP such as unity, balance, or dynamism, the notion of ways of appearing (albeit of an “higher-order”) doesn’t seem suited to many other kinds of AP (such as, e.g., gracefulness or garishness), which seem to be partly a matter of an object’s power to afford perceivers distinctive feelings. This raises the issue of response-dependence: are AP more akin to manifest sensible properties, like colours and timbres, which are arguably non-response-dependent, or are they to be analyzed on a form-perceived-with feeling model, and are thus inescapably response-dependent? If the latter is the case, what kind of response to a given property suffices to qualify the property as aesthetic? According to some, it would be better to limit the field of AP to manifest ones, at the same time allowing for an extended usage of aesthetic terms in non-artistic contexts (cf. Ottobre 2007). By appealing to a broad notion of perception in order to account for the existence of the AP (e.g., irony or profundity) usually attributed to the so-called non-perceptual art forms (such as literature and conceptual art), Shelley (2003) argues that saying that AP are perceptual amounts to saying that they are directly grasped, felt rather than inferred, and suggests that the feelings that AP characteristically engender are positively charged ones. A more comprehensive view is that offered by Levinson himself, who maintains that (1) the core of aesthetic attributions consists in an “overall phenomenal impression”, which might be “bound up with feelings” and “inflected by conceptual activity at some level” (Levinson 2006a: 323), and that (2) the spectrum of AP might be conceived as a *continuum*, ranging from AP that are arguably non-response dependent (i.e., formal and stylistic properties), to AP that are possibly response dependent – such as expressive AP, which Hermerèn (1988: 106) further splits into emotion properties,

behaviour properties, and affective properties, depending on the kinds of reactions they are taken to afford –, to clearly response-dependent AP, such as beauty or ugliness (cf. Levinson 2006b: 347-350).

In order to be complete, the classification of AP must also take into account their relationship with value. According to Sibley (2001c: 90-94), it is possible to divide the terms used in aesthetic attributions into three different groups, which range from the class of “descriptive merit-terms”, which name purely descriptive AP (such as balance, dynamism, and the likes), to the class of “evaluation-added property terms”, which are applied to indicate both that an object possesses certain properties (most notably, AP of the expressive and metaphorical kind) and that the subject who applies them has a positive (or negative) evaluative stance toward them, to “intrinsically or solely evaluative” terms (such as beautiful, excellent, mediocre, and the like). The latter are applied to underline – according to Sibley – that the thing in question possesses a certain value (or disvalue), regardless of the properties on which that value is based; but it is likewise possible to conceive them as having a content corresponding to “verdictive” properties (such as beauty or ugliness), which depend on how more specific, “substantive” AP combine with each other (cf. Zangwill 2001: 9-23) to determinate the “overarching” aesthetic value of an object (cf. Goldman 1995: 6-9). Beardsley (1982:103-110) holds that while all AP can be offered as reasons for aesthetic evaluations, some of them are eminently suitable for playing a “special value-grounding role”, either because they always count in a positive evaluative direction, and thus seem to be *pro tanto* merits of a work (think of, e.g., unity or gracefulness), or because they are “naturally interesting to us” and “touch us where we live” (this is the case of what he labels “human qualities”, i.e. qualities “similar to qualities found in persons”, such as dignity or elegance). In a similar vein, Alcaraz León (2018) defends an account of “interactionism” which states that it is by virtue of their affective/expressive dimension that the AP of a particular work of art can contribute to its moral and cognitive values. A more radical position has been advanced by a number of thinkers (Genette 1994: 111-118; De Clercq 2008; D’Angelo 2011: 40-41; Focosi 2019) who hold the stronger thesis according to which all AP are inherently evaluative, that is, have an evaluative component, which – if positive – involves one’s appreciation toward the fulfillment of a specific intent, effected through formal means (cf. Focosi 2019: 62-66).

Due to the subjective, response-dependent, and evaluative charged dimension of most – if not all – AP, some philosophers have posed certain sceptical worries about the existence of AP. While Matravers (2005) holds that aesthetic descriptions are reducible to reports of experiences caused by certain sets of non-aesthetic perceptible properties in the mind of the observer, Goldman (1995: 26-39) allows AP to exist, but only in a thin, sensibility-relativized form, so that their instantiation depends on the convergence of responses among critics of similar tastes. Against ontological non-realism about AP, Levinson argues for the objectivity of aesthetic attributions, insofar as for each aesthetic property, even if evaluatively charged, there is almost always a purely descriptive aesthetic content which can be neatly isolated – although Bender (1996) and De Clercq (2008) are sceptic of that – and on which even qualified judges with different “attitudinal” sensibilities will come to agree (the notions of “qualified” perceivers and “correct” ways of perceiving, since Hume’s inquiry into the problem of taste, are likewise of great relevance, as Matteucci [2007: 251] rightly observes). A novel realist position has been recently offered by Simoniti

(2017), who regards AP as “causally effective powers”: that is, as the capacities of an object to cause certain feelings, which capacities can be perceived without the observer having the relevant experience.

Another much debated question concerns whether the AP that an artwork possesses stand in constitutive relationship to historical and contextual facts. Arthur Danto (1981) offers arguments using indiscernible works to argue that historical understanding enters into (1) our identification of a work as a work of art and (2) our discrimination of the work’s AP, which is a matter of interpretation rather than perception. Kendall Walton (1970) states that a work’s AP depend not only on its non-aesthetic perceptible properties, but also on which of its non-aesthetic features are “standard”, which are “variable”, and which are “contra-standard” with respect to a – perceptually distinguishable – art-historical category to which the work belongs. Sedivy (2018) makes a similar point by suggesting that an artwork’s AP depend on “human intentional uses” of non-aesthetic features, and she appeals to recent approaches in philosophy of perception to refine Walton’s idea that the act of recognizing categories of art involves an acquired perceptual skill. Zangwill (2001: 55-111) has developed a view labelled “moderate formalism”, which he defends against both extreme formalism and anti-formalism. He proposes to distinguish AP into formal and non-formal, the latter partly depending not only on the intrinsic (i.e., structural/sensory/physical) non-aesthetic properties of a work of art, but also on “broad” ones (which comprise information regarding the tradition out of which a work arises as well as the artist’s intentions regarding a work). According to moderate formalism, some AP of a work of art are formal (e.g., dynamism, gracefulness, melancholy, and so forth), and there are some works of art (e.g., abstract paintings or purely instrumental music) that only have formal AP. *Contra* Danto and Walton, Zangwill argues that, as far as formal AP are concerned, viewing a work X against its historical background is a matter of “pragmatic convenience”: it may at most make us more alert and responsive to the AP that the work already possesses. Both Danto and Zangwill nonetheless agree on the fact that the very existence and nature of an artwork’s most notable AP (both formal and non-formal) depend on how the more basic non-aesthetic properties (broadly conceived) are shaped and interconnected.

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