

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
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Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts"

*Sibley begins by providing examples of aesthetic and non-aesthetic statements about works. Aesthetic statements require a certain *taste* (i.e., "an ability to *notice* or *see* or *tell* that things have certain qualities", p. 128):

"Accordingly, when a word or expression is such that taste or perceptiveness is required in order to apply it, I shall call it an *aesthetic* term or expression, and I shall, correspondingly, speak of *aesthetic* concepts or *taste* concepts." (127)

--Examples of aesthetic concepts are provided on the right hand column, p. 127.

*Aesthetic features always hold in virtue of the application of non-aesthetic features:

"When we cannot ourselves quite say what non-aesthetic features make something delicate or unbalanced or powerful or moving, the good critic often puts his finger on something which strikes us as the right explanation. In short, aesthetic terms always ultimately apply because of, and aesthetic qualities always ultimately depend upon, the presence of features which, like curving or angular lines, color contrasts, placing of masses, or speed of movement, are visible, audible, or otherwise discernible without any exercise of taste or sensibility." (128)

--But, Sibley claims that no non-aesthetic qualities ever provide (logically) sufficient conditions for the correct application of an aesthetic term. As should be familiar from our first unit, Sibley argues that 'aesthetic' is not a closed term like 'square'. But, Sibley also argues that aesthetic concepts are radically unlike other open concepts. The difference is in the lack of sufficient conditions. (129)

--It would be quite unusual, perhaps even amazing, if there were no sufficient conditions for the correct application of any aesthetic concept. Do recognize the force of the following claim:

"Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms as fully as we please but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced." (129)

--Sibley does concede that some aesthetic descriptions can be definitely ruled out, however, given certain non-aesthetic descriptions.

Q: Is this consistent with the "no sufficient conditions" claim, though?

"Though on *seeing* the picture we might say, and rightly, that it is delicate or serene or restful or sickly or insipid, no *description* in non-aesthetic terms permits

us to claim that these or any other aesthetic terms must undeniably apply to it.” (130)

--Certain non-aesthetic qualities can point towards the ascription of an aesthetic quality, but not in a decisive manner. Such non-aesthetic qualities are only *characteristic* of the aesthetic quality.

--The inability to generate sufficient conditions for the correct application of aesthetic concepts is *not* merely because these conditions would always be defeasible. (131) (If otherwise, then *there would be* sufficient conditions, absent the defeaters.)

--At the end of p. 131, and onto p. 132, Sibley distinguishes *judgment* from *taste*.

--Sibley claims that whenever someone provides the reason as to why they think the aesthetic judgment holds, we can always wonder whether the aesthetic judgment really holds, even granting the properties cited in the reason. (This is like Moore’s Open Question Argument that we find in ethics.)

--Nor is this inability to provide sufficient conditions due to an imprecision of language. (133)

Q: Is the insufficiency thesis then tantamount to the claim that aesthetic properties do not supervene on non-aesthetic properties?

--But, is this last claim about imprecision proven wrong by the following passage?

“No doubt one way of putting this is to say that the features which make something delicate or graceful, and so on, are combined in a peculiar and unique way; that the aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colors and shapes so that even a slight change might make all the difference. Nothing is to be achieved by trying to single out or separate features and generalizing about them.” (133)

Also, why can’t these sufficient conditions be more holistic than the attempts Sibley envisions in this paragraph?

--Conclusion about taste:

“It is a characteristic and essential feature of judgments which employ an aesthetic term that they cannot be made by appealing, in the sense explained, to non-aesthetic conditions.” (134)

*Given the negative conclusion of the first section, one may wonder how we acquire the ability to use and understand aesthetic concepts.

--On p. 134, Sibley notes ways in which aesthetic features differ from sensory features.

--Q: If someone has properly functioning sense organs, senses the artwork, yet does not reach the aesthetic judgment we do [Assume that we are experts, excellent critics.], how can we bring them to accept our aesthetic judgment (and *see* that it is correct) just by *talking* to them?

--Note the 7 methods that Sibley attributes to critics, on pp. 136-137. This is how we get someone to “see” aesthetic qualities. This is a perfectly natural procedure, Sibley insists. It is just that different concepts come with their own procedures: “To go on to ask, with puzzlement, how it is that *when* we do these things people come to see, is like asking how it is that, when we take the book into a good light, our companion agrees with us that it is red.” (137)

--On pp. 138-139 Sibley argues that we are taught the aesthetic concepts, at an early age, by parents, teachers, etc. who employ the same 7 methods used by critics.