

# The Concept of the Aesthetic

Nick Zangwill

Can the contemporary concept of the 'aesthetic' be defended? Is it in good shape or is it sick? Should we retain it or dispense with it?

The concept of the aesthetic is used to characterize a range of judgements and experiences. Let us begin with some examples of judgements which aestheticians classify as aesthetic, so that we have some idea of what we are talking about. These paradigm cases will anchor the ensuing discussion. Once we have some idea of which judgements are classified as aesthetic judgements, we can go on to ponder what, if anything, they have in common.

We judge that things are *beautiful* or *ugly*, or that they have or lack *aesthetic value* or *aesthetic merit*. Let us call these judgements *verdictive* aesthetic judgements. (I group judgements of beauty and aesthetic value together.<sup>1</sup>) We also judge that things are *dainty*, *dummy*, *graceful*, *garish*, *delicate*, *balanced*, *warm*, *passionate*, *brooding*, *awkward* and *sad*. Let us call these judgements *substantive aesthetic* judgements. The objects and events about which we make verdictive and substantive judgements include both natural objects and works of art.

Aestheticians have traditionally been concerned to understand the nature of verdictive judgements. Interest in substantive judgements, by contrast, is a novelty – something that has surfaced only since the Second World War. Interest in judgements of beauty and ugliness has a history of millennia, whereas interest in substantive judgements has a history of decades.

The contemporary category of aesthetic judgements, as it is usually conceived, includes both verdictive judgements and substantive judgements. But 'aesthetic' is a term of art, and there is no right answer concerning how the word should be used. For example, the modern usage is quite unlike Kant's. What is in question is the *point* of a classification which groups the beautiful together with the dainty and the dummy. Is there anything to be said for such a classification? Or is it arbitrary? Are there relevant similarities which would make such an inclusive classification illuminating and worthwhile? The other face of the problem is over representational judgements. Examples of representational judgements are judgements to the effect that a work of art is *of Napoleon* or *of a tree*. Representational judgements are usually, but not always, excluded from the category of aesthetic judgements. Are there relevant *dissimilarities* which would make such exclusion illuminating and worthwhile?

The issue is not one about aesthetic *terms*, since, as Roger Scruton has emphasized, there are many aesthetic descriptions which do not deploy aesthetic terms. (Scruton 1974; see also Sibley 1959, pp. 422–23, 446–48.) These are the *metaphorical* aesthetic descriptions. For example, we say that works of art are 'delicate' or

'balanced'. A sub-class of metaphorical aesthetic descriptions are the *expressive* metaphorical descriptions; for example, we say that works of art are 'sad' or 'brooding' or 'serene'. Moreover terms which are paradigmatically aesthetic are used metaphorically in judgements which are not aesthetic judgements (a 'beautiful' hand at cards). We are interested in a kind of mental act, not in language.

What we need to do in order to vindicate the modern concept of the aesthetic is to give an account which makes sense of the categorization of the examples. The threat is that the list of examples of aesthetic judgements is not as unified as it has been thought to be; and perhaps items off the list have a lot in common with items on it. The task is not the dull neo-Wittgensteinian one of analysing our concept of the aesthetic, but the more interesting and possibly the more truly Wittgensteinian task of uncovering the *point* of the classification.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Part One: The Neo-Kantian Programme

### 1.1 *The Judgement of Taste*

Let us begin with what we can say, relatively uncontroversially, about judgements of beauty and ugliness. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant characterized what he called the 'judgement of taste', by which he means what I have called verdictive judgements. In Kant's view, the most basic feature of judgements of taste is that they have *subjective universality*.<sup>3</sup>

A 'subjective' judgement is one that is based on a felt response to a representation, such as pleasure or displeasure. We can take a representation to mean a cognitive state such as a belief or perceptual experience, which might be true or veridical in virtue of how things stand in the world. A felt response such as pleasure or displeasure is not a cognitive state.<sup>4</sup>

A judgement which claims 'universal validity' at very least aspires to a kind of *correctness*. In this respect, Kant thinks that judgements of taste contrast with judgements of niceness and nastiness, which he calls 'judgements of the agreeable'. Judgements of taste aspire to be correct and they run the risk of failure. We *ought* to make certain judgements. There is more to be said about Kant's specific version of universality requirement, since for Kant, it is restricted to human beings or those like us; but we need not worry about this here.

On the Kantian story, judgements of taste occupy a mid-point between judgements of niceness and nastiness, and empirical judgements about the external world. Judgements of taste are like empirical judgements in that they claim universal validity, but they are unlike empirical judgements in that they are made on the basis of a subjective response. Conversely, judgements of taste are like judgements of niceness or nastiness in that they are made on the basis of a subjective response; but they are unlike judgements of niceness and nastiness which make no claim to universal validity. To cut the distinctions the other way: in respect of the claim to universal validity, judgements of taste are like empirical judgements and unlike judgements of niceness or nastiness; but in respect of subjectivity,

judgements of taste are unlike empirical judgements and like judgements of niceness or nastiness. So we have three-fold division: empirical judgements, judgements of taste, and judgements of niceness or nastiness. And judgements of taste have the two points of similarity and dissimilarity on each side which I have just noted.<sup>5</sup>

For Kant, then, judgements of taste – that is, judgements of beauty and ugliness, of aesthetic merit and demerit – are subjectively universal. And in my view, Kant is right about this. What I now want to do is to explore the prospects for *extending* Kant's account of verdictive judgements of taste to the other judgements which have been categorized as aesthetic judgements in the twentieth century. How does Kant's characterization fit with the dainty and the dumpy? If verdictive judgements are subjectively universal, can the same be said of substantive judgements?

Let us call the project of showing how all aesthetic judgements are subjectively universal 'neo-Kantian'. If there were a common thread of subjective universality, running through all aesthetic judgements, that would make the list of aesthetic judgements non-arbitrary. This is surely the natural approach to the issue, given the history – the fact that the concept has expanded from its initial core. If such a project were successful, the category of the aesthetic would be vindicated. The concept would have a point.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.2 Substantive Judgements

If the neo-Kantian project is to succeed, the reconstructed concept of the aesthetic must include the dainty and the dumpy and exclude representational properties.

Substantive judgements do well with the second feature of judgement of taste. They claim universal validity or correctness. Imagine someone who thought it appropriate to call Hawaiian music or Alpine yodelling, passionate, and flamenco or rebetika, cheerful. Such a person would not have judged as well as someone who found Hawaiian music or Alpine yodelling cheerful, and flamenco and rebetika passionate. One description is more apt than the other. So the aspiration to correctness is true of substantive judgements as well as judgements of beauty.

The more problematic question is whether substantive judgements are subjective in Kant's sense.

As Kant rightly affirmed, following the British sentimentalists, judgements of beauty or ugliness, or of aesthetic merit or demerit, are made on the basis of a response of *pleasure* or *displeasure*. Both Kant and the British sentimentalists agree that we do not *perceive* beauty, although we do perceive things which are beautiful. The question is whether we can generalize Kant's claim and say that applying *any* aesthetic concept requires some kind of response or feeling – although not necessarily pleasure or displeasure. Just as pleasure and displeasure correspond to judgements of beauty and ugliness, so perhaps other sorts of response or feeling correspond to judgements of elegance and delicacy. And perhaps there is no

subjective response or feeling in the case of representational judgements. If substantive judgements are based on a subjective response or if representational judgements are not, then substantive judgements will not be distinguished by their subjective universality in the way the neo-Kantian programme requires.

In a sense, it is necessary that the judgement that something is graceful or delicate is based on the experience of it. The difficult question is: is this *perceptual* experience? That is, do the concepts of elegance or delicacy enter into the content of perceptual experiences?<sup>7</sup> If so, the Kantian account will *not* include judgements of elegance and delicacy as aesthetic judgements. But if such judgements are based on some response or feeling that we have as a *consequence* of a perceptual experience with no such content, then the Kantian account *will* include them as aesthetic.

The trouble is that it does seem plausible that we perceive elegance and delicacy. When we judge that something is graceful or delicate, it is plausible that we experience the thing *as* graceful or *as* delicate. And descriptions of music in emotional terms, or in terms of movement, are also based on, or rationally caused by, experiencing it in a certain way. For example, the judgement that a melody is sad or that it twists and turns is founded on the experience of hearing the melody *as* sad or *as* twisting and turning. (See Scruton 1983.) The problem is that this seems to be part of our perceptual experience. It is not that we have some neutral *perception* of the music, and we then *react* by finding it sad or twisting and turning. Rather, these concepts enter into the content of our perceptual experience. One *hears* the sadness, or whatever, *in* the music. And this seems not to fit the neo-Kantian model.<sup>8</sup> If judgements of elegance or delicacy are not essentially subjective, then they fall outside the bounds of the aesthetic and we have a fragmentation of our initially tidy list of aesthetic judgements.

There is an important reply at this point. The reply is to say that although the dainty and the dumpy and the elegant and the delicate do indeed enter into the content of our experiences, that does not necessarily mean that we are *applying* these concepts to objects in the world, so that we form beliefs. We might merely be *imagining* that a thing is delicate or sad, not *believing* that it is. (See Scruton 1974, *passim*.) The judgement is an 'as if' one. Perhaps judgements made on the basis of such experiences are usefully classified as subjective. Such an imagination-based account is plausible for metaphorical judgements of delicacy and sadness. But it is also plausible for non-metaphorical substantive judgements, such as judgements of daintiness and dumpiness. We see a thing *as* dainty or *as* dumpy.

Suppose I judge that a certain table is 'plain-deal'. This feature is, in a sense, a perceptible feature of the table. It is not *narrowly* perceptible in the way that its primary and secondary qualities are perceptible. But it does seem to be a feature that we see *in* the primary and secondary qualities of the table. We see the plain-dealness *by* seeing its primary and secondary qualities. So the judgement is not a subjective one in a strict sense. On the other hand, if a judgement of plain-dealness does not involve applying concepts to the world in an empirical judgement but merely imagining that they apply, then such judgements could be said to be

subjective in a more relaxed sense. For such judgements are based on an imaginative response to ordinary perception.

There is a problem about exactly what sort of experience this imaginative experience could be. One might think that it is a form of aspect-perception – like seeing a duck-rabbit picture as a duck, or a face in a cloud. However, it seems that aesthetic imaginative perception cannot be exactly like ordinary aspect perception, where we can switch aspects at will. For there are normative constraints on aesthetic judgements of plain-dealness which are connected with normative constraints on perceptions of plain-dealness. One ought not to see the table as plain-deal if in fact it is more appropriately seen as fussy and extravagant. It is not that we can see the table as plain-deal if we feel like it, and we need not if we don't feel like it. We *ought* to see it that way. Seeing it a quite different way would be incorrect or inappropriate. But our ordinary aspect perception is not subject to such normative constraints: it is not the case that we ought to see one aspect rather than another. Even if we cannot help but see a man in the moon or a face in the clouds, there is no *requirement* that we see him there. Someone who sees an animal or a flower instead of a face is not wrong. So if we embrace the theory that substantive aesthetic qualities just *are* aspects, as Roger Scruton does in his *Art and Imagination*, then they must be a very special kind of aspect. An account needs to be given of how there *can* be normative constraints on seeing aspects. How can it be that there are some aspects that we ought to see and others that we ought not to see? The imagination-theorist needs to answer this question.<sup>9</sup>

At any rate, it seems that any theory of substantive aesthetic judgements has to say that they involve *some* kind of perception. If neo-Kantianism is to remain afloat, the kind of perception must be one in which concepts are not *applied* to the world, so that we form beliefs on the basis of those perceptions. This seems to open up the possibility that we could move the boundary between subjective and non-subjective judgements so that the category of the subjective comes to include *either* judgements based on felt responses to perceptual experiences *or* judgements based on imaginative perceptual responses to ordinary perceptual experiences. If we are allowed to stretch the concept of the subjective just a little, substantive judgements can be said to be subjective. It is still the case that such imaginative experiences are not cognitive in the sense that such experiences ground beliefs. It seems that we can save the neo-Kantian programme by being flexible about subjectivity.

### 1.3 Representational Judgements

The trouble is that if we stretch at one place, we may bulge at another. Maybe changes in conceptual shape cannot be isolated. Modifications may lead to ramifications.

The question is: does the notion we have now stretched continue to exclude representational judgements?

Judgements of representational properties have normative aspirations. Of

course, there is the relativist tradition pursued by those such as Barthes, Derrida and many others, who, despite their differences, think that the aspiration to correctness of judgements of meaning is in some sense an illusion or an unattainable goal. Where not incoherent, relativists make the error of elevating a fair epistemological point into a metaphysical point.<sup>10</sup> The fair point is that the ascription of meaning is not 'passive'; rather it is creative, and it involves drawing on one's own beliefs and values. (In fact, Donald Davidson has said as much.<sup>11</sup>) The non-sequitur is to conclude that any ascription of meaning is as valid as any other. ('The author is dead, all interpretation is permitted.') There are surely better and worse ascriptions of representational properties. If someone interpreted *Guernica* as being about the invasion of earth by Martians, that interpretation would be inferior to many others. So let us ignore the relativists and accept that representational judgements claim universal validity.

What about subjectivity? This is where the real problem lies.

The ascription of representational properties to visual art does not require that we experience *pleasure*. But Richard Wollheim seems to be right to say that to ascribe to a picture the representational property of being of a tree, we must see it *as* a tree, or that we must see a tree *in* the picture.<sup>12</sup> But then the concept 'tree' enters into the content of our perceptual experiences. It is not that we think that there is a representation of a tree because we have some subjective response *to* the perceptual experience.

The problem is that if we have conceded that the ascription of some *substantive* properties involves aspect perception, or something very like that, and that makes *them* subjective, then we seem to be committed to saying the same of *representational* properties. Once we widen the category of the subjective to include substantive judgements, it seems that representational properties will also slip in. But the category of the aesthetic is usually supposed to include the former but not the latter.

However, it might be argued that there is a difference. Representational properties are a matter of *meaning* – substantive properties are not. Someone must *make* something a representation; but substantive properties can be possessed by natural things. Suppose that something is a representation of a tree. Then, as Wollheim insists, the correctness or incorrectness of seeing a tree-aspect is determined by something outside the work of art – the artist's intention; and it might be argued that this is *not* true of the aspect perception which is involved in verdictive or substantive judgements. In the case of representational judgements, what makes an aspect perception the right one is determined in part by the artist's intention. A relativist might affect to say that the *Mona Lisa* can with perfect justice be said to be a representation of a flying saucer; but if its maker did not intend it to represent a flying saucer, then it doesn't. Something represents a tree only if it can be seen as a tree, or a tree can be seen in it, and the artist intended that it can be seen as a tree, or that a tree can be seen in it. Representation is 'derived intentionality' not 'intrinsic intentionality', in John Searle's terms (Searle 1983). And that means that representational properties are partly determined by the artist's intention. Intentions in part determine representational properties, even if

it is true that the best way to *get at* the artist's intentions is usually not to dig up bibliographical information about him but to go in for creative interpretation of the work of art.

So it might be argued that although there are normative constraints on representational judgements – some are correct and others incorrect – this normativity is unlike the normative aspirations of verdictive judgements and substantive judgements. The point is not merely that what determines the correctness or incorrectness of certain aspect perceptions is something beyond the object. For that is arguably also the case with the beautiful and the dainty where we need to see the work in the context of a stylistic tradition of other works (Walton 1970). The point is that representational properties are *constituted* in part by the artist's intentions. By contrast, it is not part of what constitutes the beauty or daintiness of a thing that an artist intends that it will be beautiful or dainty. (That's what he might *strive* for, but he might fail.<sup>13</sup>) Maybe both representational and substantive judgements involve aspect-perception. But the correctness of seeing a tree-representation as a tree is constituted in part by the artist's intention that it should be seen as a tree, whereas the correctness of seeing something as dainty is not constituted in part by the artist's intention that it should be seen as dainty. The artist's intention is a cause but not a constitutive part of its being dainty whereas the artist's intention is both a cause and a constitutive part of its representing a tree.

It seems, then, that the normative constraints on aspect perception which are involved in representational judgements are different from the normative constraints on aspect perception which are involved in substantive judgements. Representational judgements do not make the same kind of intention-independent normative demand on our aspect perceptions that substantive judgements make.

Now once we have got this far enmeshed in the dialectic, this last move might seem like progress – it might seem to help the neo-Kantian. But if we step back and think about it, we can see that something has gone wrong. What was supposed to be a significant difference between aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgements has turned out to rest on some vanishingly subtle difference in normative demand. But if we were so generously easy going with the concept of subjectivity, in order to accommodate substantive judgements, why not be equally easy going with normative constraints on representational judgements? And anyway, is it really so uncontroversial what kind of normative demand aesthetic judgements make? It may prove rather hard to hold on to the neo-Kantian distinction between aesthetic judgements and representational judgements. Establishing the neo-Kantian programme has become a fiddly exercise which fails to preserve any real interest or point in the category of the aesthetic. It is not that we could not operate with such a category, but that given the neo-Kantian epicycles we have been through, it would be difficult to see why we would bother. What initially seemed to be a fundamental category – The Aesthetic – has turned out to involve a lot of finicky distinctions. We have lost a clean and illuminating way of characterizing a significant category.

## Part Two: The Determination Account

### 2.1 Aesthetic/Nonaesthetic, Meaning and Necessity

What we need is a different approach. The neo-Kantian route is not stupid, and in many ways it is the natural programme to explore. But instead of working *outwards* from judgements of beauty and ugliness, I believe that we should work *downwards*.

On what I call the *determination* account, verdictive judgements are subjectively universal, just as Kant said. But there is a certain necessary link between substantive and verdictive judgements, and there is no such necessary link between representational and verdictive judgements. So we can retain a tight grip on subjectivity and normativity. On this account, we need not compromise or start bending concepts.

What exactly is this necessary link? The necessary connection between verdictive and substantive judgements that I have in mind is that it is part of our concept of substantive properties that they determine aesthetic value and disvalue. Suppose that I make the verdictive judgement that a certain table is aesthetically excellent. The point of a substantive judgement about the table is to describe exactly *why* and *how* it is aesthetically excellent. What this claim presupposes is not just the determination of the aesthetic by the nonaesthetic, which was well described by Frank Sibley (Sibley 1965), but a determination relation *within* the aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> Substantive judgements do not describe neutral features of things but *ways of being beautiful or ugly*. We can put the point in terms of the *function* of the judgements. The function of verdictive judgements is simply to pick out aesthetic value and disvalue; but the function of substantive judgements is to pick out the substantive properties that determine aesthetic value and disvalue. Substantive judgements are there to *serve* verdictive judgements. Substantive and verdictive judgements are inextricably locked together in this way.

There are two related theses here. First: there is a connection of meaning between particular substantive and verdictive judgements. And second: it is constitutive of thinking in substantive terms to realize that substantive judgements are deployed in order to describe and explain why and how things are beautiful or ugly. This is a 'framework principle' for aesthetic judgements.

Two of points of clarification.

(a) The necessary link I describe is between *judgements*. It is plausible that there are necessary links between aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties. Suppose a painting has a large unbroken expanse of blue. That secondary quality of the picture might determine boldness. But there is no connection of *meaning* between the token secondary quality judgement that the painting has an large unbroken expanse of blue and the judgement of boldness in the way that there *is* a connection of meaning between the judgement of boldness and the judgement of aesthetic merit. Judgements of secondary qualities may describe that which determines aesthetic merit, but this is not their *raison d'être*. We can make such judgements with no thought of aesthetic merit. The same is true of representational

judgements. Representational judgements sometimes describe the representational properties which in part determine aesthetic properties. This relation between the properties is necessary, but there is no connection of meaning between judgements about these properties.

(b) The claim is that there is no such thing as a neutral substantive aesthetic judgement. It is a thesis about thought, not about language. (Judgements are mental acts which may or may not be expressed out loud.) It is true that some substantive terms have no evaluative direction. An example might be 'dainty'. Such terms contrast with terms like 'dumpy' and 'elegant' which do have evaluative direction. There are also metaphorical substantive descriptions which seem to be evaluatively neutral. For example, calling something 'heavy' seems neutral by itself. But particular uses of such terms on particular occasions are never evaluatively neutral. They always serve to describe ways of achieving aesthetic value or disvalue.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Hierarchy

In order to find any kind of uncontrived unity in the judgements that we classify as aesthetic, we must recognize *hierarchy* among them. Judgements of aesthetic value – of beauty and ugliness – are the fundamental sort of aesthetic judgement that we make. It is such judgements which move artists and audiences to make and experience works of art.<sup>16</sup> And it is such judgements which move us to seek out, respect and protect nature. Aesthetic value is important to us. But we also want to explain *how* and *why* things are beautiful or ugly. This is where the substantive judgements come in. Their role is entirely subsidiary to judgements of aesthetic value and we completely misunderstand such judgements if we miss this.

So even if we *concede* that substantive judgements are *not* themselves subjective, it is still true that they are necessarily connected with judgements of aesthetic merit which *are* subjective. The *raison d'être* of substantive judgements is to describe that which determines aesthetic value, which we *do* apprehend by means of a subjectively universal judgement. And we could not make substantive judgements unless we made subjectively universal judgements of aesthetic value.<sup>17</sup> There is thus a close conceptual tie between substantive and verdictive judgements which warrants our putting them both in the same class. There is a rationale for saying that substantive judgements are aesthetic judgements.

This means that we do not need to stretch the concept of subjectivity in order to try to accommodate substantive judgements. We can group the beautiful together with the dainty and the dumpy without the messy terminological legislation that the neo-Kantian programme involves. On the determination account, we do not have to worry about whether substantive and representational judgements both involve seeing aspects, and we do not have to worry about showing that substantive and representational judgements make a different kind of normative demand. The determination account is far simpler than the neo-Kantian

epicycles. On the determination account, substantive judgements have *derivative* aesthetic status. Aesthetic judgements are those which are either themselves subjectively universal, or else which are necessarily tied to judgements which are subjectively universal.

There tended to be a certain assumption at work among those who thought of themselves as exploring the variety of our aesthetic conceptual repertoire. The assumption was that it necessarily involves a *levelling* process. We were led to a kind of conceptual egalitarianism according to which all aesthetic concepts are on a par. But conceptual investigation does not have to be like this. The alternative, which I believe that real conceptual probing reveals, is that there is *structure* among our aesthetic concepts and judgements. Aesthetic properties are hierarchically structured, and this is reflected in aesthetic concepts and to some extent in aesthetic terms.

### 2.3 Determination, Laws, Reasoning and Rhetoric

Given the determination view that I advocate, I need to say whether I think verdictive judgements can be *supported* by substantive judgements. For it might look as if I am endorsing a certain position in the debate about reasoning in aesthetics. It looks as if I am siding with those who say that there can be general reasons for aesthetic judgements (for example, Bender 1995). The 'generalist' thinks that there can, whereas the 'particularist' thinks not. Generalists need not go as far as Monroe Beardsley, who held that there are a select group of exceptionless principles; a generalist need only hold with Frank Sibley, that there are what we can call *pro tanto* reasons – reasons which can be over-ridden (Beardsley 1982; Sibley 1983). These principles derive from the fact that properties such as elegance and delicacy have inherent polarity or evaluative direction.

However, in this debate I am on the particularist side, even though I agree with the thesis about the inherent evaluative polarity of elegance and delicacy.

In thinking about this, we need to note that substantive judgements might be *pro tanto* reasons for a verdictive judgement even though the substantive property might be an *overall* defect in a complex work. The merit of an elegant part survives even in a complex work in which the elegance of that part detracts from the overall value of the whole. Perhaps the other substantive properties of the whole are power and dynamism, and the one elegant part prevents the many other powerful and dynamic parts combining to realize an overall powerful and dynamic work. Nevertheless, the lonely elegance persists. (Contrast Bender 1995, section II.) It does not commit suicide out of guilt. The defender of the view that substantive judgements are reasons for verdictive judgements should say that substantive aesthetic properties have evaluative direction or polarity on their own and not merely in the context of a whole work. Elegance is always an aesthetic merit even though in the context of a whole work, the elegant part might lower the work's overall aesthetic excellence.

Nevertheless, I do not think that substantive judgements supply even *pro tanto*

reasons, in any interesting sense, for a verdictive judgement. Interesting reasons for a verdictive judgement must put *pressure* on someone to accept it. I think that a dilemma opens up at this point. Either substantive judgements have evaluative content or not. If substantive judgements have no evaluative content, then they provide no support for the verdictive judgement. For someone could easily accept the substantive judgement but reject the verdictive judgement. On the other hand, suppose they have evaluative content. Might such a substantive judgement be put forward in support of a verdictive judgement? Surely not. For the substantive and verdictive judgements are too closely linked. Someone who rejects the verdictive judgement will also reject the substantive judgement. (See further Zangwill 1995c.)

Someone might reply that if a substantive judgement has evaluative direction, why complain that it is too good a reason? Surely it is as good as could be! But this is beside the point. The relation between verdictive and substantive judgements might indeed be uncontroversial in some or all cases. In such cases, there is a trivial and uninteresting reason-giving relation because of the connection of meaning. But in all cases, the relation between the *nonaesthetic* and the substantive remains controversial. To give reasons for an aesthetic judgement, in any interesting sense, we need an epistemic route from the *nonaesthetic* to the aesthetic, not just from the substantive to the verdictive. But this is just what Sibley rightly denied when he said that aesthetic judgements were not 'positively condition-governed' (Sibley 1959).

If we take something's being G to be a reason for its being F, then this commits us to the generalization that all G things are F, other things being equal. (R.M. Hare was right about that.) Aesthetic laws cannot flow from aesthetic to nonaesthetic properties because of the variable realization of aesthetic properties in nonaesthetic properties. The things that share an aesthetic property have no ordinary nonaesthetic property in common (apart from some wildly disjunctive nonaesthetic property). If there were aesthetic laws, they would have to flow the other way, from nonaesthetic to aesthetic. The trouble is that these laws will be highly specific. They will bind only complex conjunctive nonaesthetic properties to aesthetic properties. But even if we grant such laws, they will be too complex for us to grasp and use as a basis for prediction (Zangwill 1993, 1998b). Therefore they cannot underwrite reasons. Of course, less complex laws might be proposed, such as that one should not have blue in the foreground of a painting or that music in a major key sounds happy. But such purported 'laws' tend to be doomed – Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* or Hank Williams come along to refute them.

Nonaesthetic properties are *responsible* for aesthetic properties; they determine them. But when some particular nonaesthetic property determines an aesthetic property, there is no connection of meaning between the concepts which pick out the two properties. So if we know that a thing has a certain nonaesthetic property, we are not thereby in a position to know that it has the aesthetic property. Nevertheless, this is not to say that there is no connection of meaning at all between aesthetic and nonaesthetic concepts. What we know as part of understanding aesthetic concepts is that if a thing has an aesthetic property, then it has

some nonaesthetic property which is responsible for it. This is a *framework* principle.<sup>18</sup> It is an a priori presupposition of aesthetic thought. But knowing this general framework principle does not put us in a position to know any particular determination relation. For that, as Sibley rightly said, we need something more like 'taste', sensitivity' or 'perceptiveness', where these words denote a faculty of mind, of some sort or other, which is radically different from the faculties of mind involved in knowing about nonaesthetic properties.

If we seek a diagnosis of the epistemic autonomy of the aesthetic, it is not hard to find. It lies in the subjectivity of judgements of aesthetic value. Just as Donald Davidson argues that mental and physical concepts are governed by radically disparate constraints which render them anomalous with respect to each other,<sup>19</sup> so subjective and non-subjective (or empirical) forms of judgement are so radically different that we cannot bring the two into lawlike relation. And we need to do that if we are to reason from one to the other.

There is a limit set to reasoning about aesthetic matters. We must ultimately look or listen, and feel. I take comfort in the fact that writers such as Ernst Gombrich and Clement Greenberg concur, in that they retain a keen sense that art has a value which we can only appreciate, at least in part, by looking and feeling. As Kant said, one cannot be reasoned into judgements of beauty: 'I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or arguing about the matter' (Kant 1928, p. 140).

If substantive judgements do not give reasons for verdictive judgements, then what *is* their role? Substantive judgements are more like *rationalizations*, in the pejorative sense, than reasons. Having judged that something is good or bad, the substantive judgement says what is good or bad about it.<sup>20</sup> As Greenberg said in an interview: 'In criticism, the value judgement comes first'. It is true that listening to others expressing their substantive judgements may persuade us to revise our verdictive judgements. But that is because our attention has been drawn to certain ways in which things achieve excellence or its opposite. It is more like *rhetoric* than *reasoning*. Rhetoric is most usefully defined in the Socratic way, by contrast with reasoning. In general, I think that there is a lot to be said for Socrates' critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. But rhetoric might be defended in some domain if it can be argued (!) that it is not possible to reason in that domain. For then, only non-rational persuasion remains. Given the limits set to critical argument and reasoning in aesthetics, it is legitimate that part of critical discourse is a certain kind of rhetoric. But its end is nothing disreputable – it is nothing less than proper experience and judgement. Such rhetoric should operate in tandem with our rational faculties. While there may be no arguing from the nonaesthetic to the aesthetic, there is a norm of consistency constraining aesthetic judgements. This norm dictates that differences in aesthetic judgements between two things must be accompanied by differences in nonaesthetic judgements. (This norm derives from the framework principle.) Aesthetic rhetoric inevitably starts from other responses and judgements of the person being addressed. It typically works by trying to get us to see something as having an aesthetic likeness to something that we already have a view about. Having non-rationally been brought to see an aesthetic likeness, we can then reason according to canons of consistency. There

can be reasoning about aesthetic matters – but its role is derivative. Aesthetic reasoning is, and ought to be, the slave of the aesthetic passions.

### Coda

To some extent, I would have aesthetics return to a state of pre-war innocence. Things were far simpler and more straightforward in the good old days when aestheticians only had to worry about judgements of beauty and ugliness. That concern demarcated a distinctive topic – a form of judgement unlike empirical judgement and unlike judgements of the agreeable.

In the good old days, aestheticians did not worry about daintiness, dumpiness, elegance, balance and the rest. But since J.L. Austin's jibe and one aspect of Sibley's work, aestheticians have become sensitive to the complex and varied nature of aesthetic descriptions. Insofar as such description occurs, I suppose this is a good thing, to an extent, since we do not want to overlook phenomena. But there has also been a serious down-side, which is that we have been distracted from philosophical issues which have greater centrality than the conscientious surface exploration of the subtle variety of aesthetic description.

There is more in philosophical life than the investigation of our concepts. There are pressing questions about whether, and if so how, the commitments of a range of concepts can be legitimate. In aesthetics, we should be interested in the Kantian question of how a judgement of taste is possible. But if we are to get to the issue about what if anything legitimizes a form of judgement, we need a decent picture of what we are seeking to justify.

I have argued that the category of the aesthetic is in good shape. It is not hopelessly amorphous and we should not dispense with it. We need not panic and exclude substantive judgements from the category of the aesthetic due to their lack of subjective universality or include representational judgements due to their boasting subjective universality. The determination account shows how the concept of the aesthetic non-arbitrarily groups verdictive and substantive judgements together while excluding representational judgements along with judgements of primary and secondary qualities. So there is a rationale for the contemporary concept of the aesthetic. The concept reflects an important independently functioning kind of judgement. The aesthetic is, as it were, a *natural mental kind*.

In my view this conceptual repair is timely. We need to have the concept up and running, in order to deploy it in our understanding of many aspects of human life. And in particular, it is about time we brought it back to bear on our understanding of art.<sup>21</sup>

Nick Zangwill  
 Department of Philosophy  
 The University of Glasgow  
 Glasgow G12 8QQ  
 Scotland

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I justify grouping these judgements together in Zangwill 1995c.

<sup>2</sup> The topic of this paper is not art. So I shall not be concerned with whether or not there are some works of art which have no aesthetic purpose.

<sup>3</sup> Kant 1928. Kant's account develops from, but goes beyond, the views of the British sentimentalists. See Zangwill 1994.

<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive states, see Zangwill 1998c.

<sup>5</sup> On this 'minimal' account of aesthetic judgements, there is kind of pleasure we take in the representation of a thing, and we take that pleasure to ground a judgement which aspires to be correct. Will our judgements and experience of *literature* be aesthetic on such a minimal account? It might seem so. Our experience of the valuable properties of literature affords us pleasure, and the pleasure is one which we take to be appropriate. This combination of pleasure and normativity makes the case similar to our experience of the beauty of abstract paintings and absolute music. This might tempt us to classify our pleasure in literature as aesthetic. However, we might want to move beyond the minimal account and say that subjectivity and normativity are *necessary but not sufficient* for the aesthetic. This is independently plausible if we consider that emotions, such as pride, grief and hate are feelings which can be *morally* evaluated, even though they do not ground aesthetic judgements. Kant, in particular, has much else to add to subjectivity and normativity. He insisted that the pleasure in the beautiful is also 'disinterested' in his special sense. (See Zangwill 1992, 1995e.) If we think that Kant was right to add that proviso, the question is whether our judgements of works of literature have this extra feature of genuine judgements of taste. Some judgements might, and some might not. See also Zangwill 1998a where I argue that many valuable properties of literature are not aesthetic properties.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Sibley famously claimed that the correct application of aesthetic terms "requires an exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation" (Sibley 1959, p. 421). He seemed to many to be explaining 'aesthetic' qualities in terms of the faculty of taste, and then also explaining the faculty of 'taste' (or 'appreciation', 'sensitivity' etc.) in terms of aesthetic qualities. Ted Cohen and Peter Kivy complained that this is too tight a circle to provide illumination (Cohen 1973; Kivy 1975). But Sibley's approach has a Kantian pedigree insofar as he explains a range of properties (or 'qualities') in terms of a faculty of mind. There is nothing wrong with trying to give sense and unity to the aesthetic by describing a certain faculty of mind, so long as we don't try to take the explanation back in the other direction. Kant is prepared to go a lot further than Sibley in what he says about the faculty of mind.

<sup>7</sup> I don't take possession and deployment of concepts to involve sophisticated linguistic abilities. I assume that perceptions are intentional states in which we deploy concepts of objects and properties.

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is a good idea to avoid talking vaguely of *aesthetic experience*, since 'experience' is ambiguous between perceptual experience of things in the world and a felt response such as pleasure. Kant warns us against the very same confusion with the word 'sensation' (Kant 1928, section 3). Commentators have been grossly unfair in their discussion of this important passage. (See Zangwill 1995e.)

<sup>9</sup> For other problems with thinking of aesthetic properties as aspects see Kivy 1968.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent clear exposition and critical discussion of Derrida and his ilk can be found in Sim 1992. This is a good survey for students. See also Grant 1996.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning' and other essays in Davidson 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Wollheim 1980. Notice that this means that the category of representational properties excludes the purely symbolic properties of visual art, the understanding of which does not involve perceiving-as or perceiving-in. Those properties are of interest to 'semiologists'. Meaning, in this sense, can outrun what can be seen *in* the picture. See Bryson 1981.

<sup>13</sup> It is also true that an artist might intend to make a tree-representation, and fail, because the thing cannot be seen as a tree or a tree can be seen in it. But that does not affect the fact that when something has a representational property, the correctness of an aspect perception is determined in part by intention, whereas in the case of substantive properties it is not.

<sup>14</sup> I say more about this determination in Zangwill 1995c.

<sup>15</sup> This move evades Peter Kivy's argument against the 'value-tending' account of aesthetic concepts in Kivy 1975. He argues that many aesthetic terms have no evaluative direction or polarity. But like many others, Kivy casts the issue in terms of aesthetic *terms*, which I think muddies the issue, since we are interested in aesthetic *judgements* and *concepts*. See also footnote 1 of Sibley 1959 where he says that we are interested in *uses* of aesthetic terms – a qualification that Sibley himself often fails to heed.

<sup>16</sup> See Zangwill 1995b, 1995d and 1998d.

<sup>17</sup> I am less sure about whether someone could make verdictive judgements without substantive judgements. Maybe young children have no consciousness of *what* makes things beautiful beside their primary and secondary qualities. But I think that it is impossible for someone to make substantive judgements but not verdictive judgements.

<sup>18</sup> See Zangwill 1995a, for a parallel claim in moral philosophy.

<sup>19</sup> See 'Mental Events' and 'Psychology as Philosophy' in Davidson 1980.

<sup>20</sup> For such an account of the role of so-called 'thick concepts' in moral philosophy, which also deals with substantive aesthetic concepts, see Burton 1992. See also Blackburn 1992.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful for helpful comments from two anonymous referees.

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