

Higher-Level Perception: Sibley's Case for Aesthetic Perception (draft)

Fabian Dorsch

October 15, 2009

One important issue in the philosophy of perception is the question of which features of objects are perceivable.¹ Perhaps the only fairly uncontroversial claim in this debate is that we can perceive the traditional examples of what have been called 'secondary qualities' — such as colours, smells, or tastes.² But even among those who accept that we are also able to perceive certain basic 'primary qualities' — notably shapes, distances, sizes, weights, and so on — there is disagreement about whether our access to more higher-level properties can likewise be perceptual. Thus, it is debated, for instance, whether we can see the sadness or intelligence of a friend, the kindness of an action, the elegance of a gait, the climbability of a wall, the fragility of a glass, the quality of a proof or of a move in chess, the content of a painting, or even simpler properties like being a bottle or being a cat.

Some of our recognitions of such higher-level features have three things in common. First, they are immediate in the sense of being phenomenologically (or psychologically) immediate. We need not engage in a conscious inference or another form of reasoning in order to notice that someone is sad or that a certain chess move is bad. Second, our awareness of the higher-level features involves or is grounded in the — typically perceptual — recognition of relevant lower-level features which contribute to the realisation³ of the higher-level features in question. We notice that a friend is sad partly on the basis of perceiving the tone of his voice or the shape of his gestures. And we notice that a chess move is bad partly in response to perceiving the specific situation on the board. Third, we have an intelligible and reasonable practice of backing up our ascriptions of the higher-level features by highlighting the respective lower-level properties. When someone challenges our judgement that our friend is sad, or the move bad, we support our assessments by referring to the lower-level features just mentioned. Indeed, being able to provide this kind of support is actually something that is required from us. If we fail to satisfy this demand, the standing of our judgements, as well as our status as judges, will suffer.

There is a certain tension between the first and the third element. How can our recognition of the higher-level features be both phenomenologically immediate and open

¹There is at least one sense in which the issue of whether certain features are perceivable is distinct from the issue of whether they are knowable by perception. For, according to at least one notion of perceptual knowledge, we know something perceptually if we know it non-inferentially (and without reliance on memory or testimony) on the basis of perception (cf. Campbell (*)). Perceivability, on the other hand, requires more than this (cf. Millar [2000]).

²*Cf. McDowell against the perceivability of primary qualities.

³*Terminology

to support through additional considerations? If we take our ascriptions of the features to be justified inferentially or by some other form of reasoning, we owe an explanation of how our recognition can still be phenomenologically immediate - perhaps in terms of habituation, or of sub-personal or implicit inferences. But if, on the other hand, we assume that we perceive (or feel, intuit, etc.) those features, it becomes difficult to account for the availability of, and need for, additional backing in the shape of reference to the relevant lower-level features. When we judge something to be red on the basis of our visual perception of it, it is unreasonable to demand from us to support our judgement by pointing to some lower-level features of the object, such as its surface reflectance properties. In particular, we have no reason for our perceptual judgement other than the fact that the object perceptually strike us as being red, and perhaps also that nothing is unusual or wrong with our mind or the environment during our experience of the object concerned. By contrast, it is appropriate to ask us to support our aesthetic judgements in terms of relevant lower-level features.

In this essay, I aim to explore the prospects of the perceptual strategy. As my primary target, I have chosen Frank Sibley's theory of our recognition of aesthetic qualities⁴, such as elegance, unity or garishness. Not only does Sibley's account endorse the three mentioned observations about our awareness of these higher-level features and combine them with a perceptual model of our access to the latter. It also involves a detailed and sophisticated attempt to avoid the tension potentially to be found in this combination by interpreting our practice of supporting our aesthetic judgements in non-justificatory terms. Indeed, it is not easy to conceive of a better defence of the idea that our awareness of certain higher-level features is perceptual, despite allowing for some kind of support or criticism in terms of relevant lower-level features. However, despite this focus on aesthetic qualities and on Sibley's take on our awareness of them, my hope is that the following considerations apply to other kinds of higher-level features and therefore have relevance for disciplines other than aesthetics, too.

In the first section of this essay, I sketch Sibley's view on the perceivability of aesthetic qualities. The second section portrays his understanding of the element of support linked to our reference to the lower-level features helping to realise those qualities. The third section argues that his account of this element fails and therefore cannot avoid the tension between phenomenological immediacy — accounted for in terms of perceivability — and additional support. In the final section, I discuss a more recent attempt to improve on Sibley's view by taking the reference to lower-level features to support aesthetic perceptions, and not aesthetic judgements. My conclusion is that this modified perceptual account does not fare better as Sibley's, and that it may be more promising to give up on the idea of the perceivability of aesthetic — and similar higher-level — qualities and to try to account for the phenomenological immediacy of the respective judgements in different terms.

I.

Frank Sibley, among others, has argued that the perception of aesthetic qualities is central to aesthetic experience. More specifically, he takes aesthetic perception to be a necessary

⁴Which are either purely descriptive higher-level features of objects, or thick aesthetic values.

condition for the occurrence of the judgemental, emotional and evaluative elements involved in this kind of experience.

‘It is of importance to note first that, broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of colour scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. [...] Unless [people] do perceive [aesthetic qualities] for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgement are beyond them.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 34)

This means that our aesthetic engagement with objects has to start with the perception of their aesthetic qualities, before it can then develop into some richer forms of aesthetic experience. But, as Sibley acknowledges (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 34, 40), we ascribe aesthetic qualities to objects not only when perceiving them. We also do so on the basis of testimony.⁵ In contrast to perceptually grounded judgements or beliefs, however, testimonially grounded ones are irrelevant for aesthetic experience.

‘Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 34)

Moreover, Sibley takes the difference between the two kinds of judgement to be one in kind since, for him, the perception of aesthetic qualities is essential to the respective judgements grounded in them — namely ‘aesthetic judgements’ in his terminology — but not to other ascriptions of aesthetic qualities (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 34, 40).

‘To suppose indeed that one can make aesthetic judgements without aesthetic perception, say, by following rules of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgement.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 34)

‘[...] aesthetic perception [...] 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.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 40)

This raises the question of what this difference in kind consists in, and of why Sibley assumes its existence. Any answer to the first question should be able to explain why non-perceptually grounded ascriptions of aesthetic qualities play no role in aesthetic experience, while perceptually grounded judgements are central to the latter. In particular, it should be elucidated why solely the perception of aesthetic qualities gives rise to aesthetic emotions and evaluations.

A first suggestion may be that (one version or another of) the *Principle of Acquaintance* is true, according to which we can acquire knowledge of the instantiation of aesthetic qualities only by perceptually experiencing them, and not by trusting the word of others

⁵I will return below * to the possibility of inferring the instantiation of aesthetic qualities, as well as to Sibley’s scepticism about it.

about their exemplification or by inferring it from the instantiation of some other — presumably non-aesthetic — features (cf. Budd [2003]).⁶ Given that appropriate emotional and evaluative responses to the exemplification of aesthetic qualities are possible only if the recognition of the latter is possible, the Principle of Acquaintance would provide a reason for taking non-perceptually grounded ascriptions of such qualities to be irrelevant for aesthetic experience.

Sibley clearly endorses the negative part of this principle with respect to the impossibility of inferential knowledge.⁷ But he seems to be less sceptical — and rightly so — about judgements or beliefs based on testimony. After all, we can ‘learn from others’ and, moreover, ‘on good authority’ (Sibley [2001b]: 34). If you tell me about a smooth and relaxed piece of music, and if also I know that you are trustworthy in such matters, then there is no good reason to deny that my resulting belief concerning those aesthetic qualities may and should count as justified and as constituting knowledge.⁸ In accordance with this, Sibley’s conception of the difference in kind between perceptual and testimonial judgements appears to be slightly different, as illustrated by this passage:

‘Thus, rather as a colour-blind man may infer that something is green without seeing that it is, and rather as a man, without seeing a joke himself, may say that something is funny because others laugh, so someone may attribute balance or gaudiness to a painting, or say that it is too pale, without himself having judged it so.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 35)

In this comparison, Sibley highlights — even if only somewhat implicitly — the difference between people possessing the required sensitivity or expertise to recognise certain properties at first hand and people lacking this capacity. The blind are not acquainted with visible properties, and the humourless not with funniness. Instead, they have to rely on testimony or inference to come to know about the presence of these features. Although Sibley does not mention this, the special epistemic situation of the blind and the humourless has the consequence that their access to the properties in question is not canonical and, moreover, ultimately depends on the canonical access of others. If no one could see the gaudiness of a painting, the blind would be unable to come to know about it. And if no one could experience the funniness of a joke, the humourless would not be able to recognise it either.⁹

The fact that Sibley treats aesthetic qualities in the same way as visible properties and funniness suggests then that he believes that there are also two ways of coming to know about the exemplification of the former: a canonical and independent way, and a non-canonical and dependent way. Accordingly, perception is taken to be the canonical

⁶Note that the Principle of Acquaintance may also be understood as a claim about our access to aesthetic values (cf. Budd [2003]). — *There is also the possibility of judgements based on sensory memories or imaginings.

⁷See Sibley [2001a], although he mentions there (in note 6 and on page 21) some possible exceptions or borderline cases. Cf. also Budd [1999].

⁸See Budd [2003] for further discussion of this issue and a defense of the possibility of testimonial aesthetic knowledge. * See also Hopkins [forthcoming], who tries to make sense of Kant’s claim that such knowledge is impossible, accepts that this, while suggesting that it is still irrational for us to form the knowledge-constituting belief.

⁹*Or so it seems. Emotional experience vs. perceptual experience. Is funniness a subjective value?

method of recognising aesthetic qualities. And people who ascribe these qualities without perceiving (or having perceived) them are said to have ultimately to rely on the perceptual experiences of others.

This view can then explain the centrality of perception to aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation in the manner suggested by Malcolm Budd (cf. Budd [2003]). His proposal is that what matters for aesthetic evaluation is that we recognise how aesthetic qualities are realised in the respective objects. But merely coming to know about their exemplification is not sufficient for this. What is needed is perception of the qualities. Similarly, it may be argued that aesthetic emotions — which are, after all closely linked to aesthetic evaluations in one way or another¹⁰ — occur, too, only in response to the recognition of how aesthetic qualities are realised in their objects. That aesthetic qualities ‘have to’ be perceived should therefore be read as a condition on aesthetic experience, rather than as a condition on mere knowledge.

Sibley’s claim about the centrality of the perception of aesthetic qualities to aesthetic experience is then perhaps best understood in terms of the idea that perception is our canonical way of accessing those qualities. This is compatible with the fact that it is likely that Sibley had something stronger in mind with his claim about the significance of perception. For the canonical status of perception does not on its own imply a difference in kind between perceptually and non-perceptually grounded ascriptions of aesthetic qualities. Given that the two kinds of judgement do not differ in whether they are justified or constitute knowledge, the difference has to be located in some other of their features. And the obvious candidate is their conceptualisation of the ascribed qualities. It is neither uncommon, nor implausible to claim that seeing and blind people possess different concepts of visible features — perhaps parallel to the difference between our ordinary concepts of, say, a birch tree or a particle accelerator and those of experts in those fields — and, as a consequence, end up with different kinds of knowledge.¹¹ The difference in knowledge thereby does not concern the states of affairs known, but instead the way how these qualities are presented and known.¹² And it may then be this difference which helps to explain why only perceptual knowledge of aesthetic qualities enables us to recognise how the latter are realised in the object.

Here is not the place to assess this view, or to decide whether it is really Sibley’s (cf. Budd [2003] for more on this). It suffices to record that he endorses the idea that our access to aesthetic qualities is, basically, perceptual. One (minor) reason for his endorsement is that this view captures best how we talk about our access to aesthetic qualities. Some examples have already been mentioned in the passages quoted above. And, in response to a sceptic about perceptual access to aesthetic qualities, Sibley writes also:

‘This kind of comparison between the exercise of taste and the use of the five senses is indeed familiar; our use of the word ‘taste’ itself shows that the

¹⁰*It is almost orthodoxy to claim that we recognise aesthetic values by experiencing certain emotions or sentiments (cf. Kant [1990], Hume [1985], Budd [1995], etc.). I agree that aesthetic emotions provide us with access to aesthetic values. But I doubt that the values in question can be objective (cf. Dorsch [2007]*). The recognition of the latter requires instead some form of reasoning (cf. Bender [1995], Sibley [2001c]).

¹¹Cf. * — * Cf. the Mary-problem/phenomenal concepts. But cf. also Budd on this.

¹²*This remains true even if the ascribed qualities have to be specified in terms of the canonical experiences of them (cf. McDowell): objectivity vs. response-dependence.

comparison is age-old and very natural. [...] It is true that someone with perfect eyes or ears might miss them, but we do after all say we *observe* or *notice* them ('Did you notice how very graceful she was?', 'Did you observe the exquisite balance in all his pictures?').' (Sibley [2001a]: 14)

These observations are relevant and should be taken into account (*). But reflection on other examples — such as 'seeing the point' or 'feeling the pressure' — suggest that we use the respective words in different senses, one of which is possibly merely metaphorically (e.g., the point of an argument is, arguably, an abstract entity). The noted naturalness of these expressions and of our familiarity with the qualities concerned, however, point to another important observation: namely that our judgemental ascriptions of aesthetic qualities are normally non-inferential responses to perceptions of lower-level perceivable properties. Sibley has argued at length that we cannot deduce, or infer by means of aesthetic principles, the presence of aesthetic qualities on the basis of knowledge about the instantiation of lower-level features, even if the former metaphysically depend in one way or another on the latter (cf. Sibley [2001a]). And this conclusion has surely been among his main motivations to assume our access to aesthetic qualities to be perceptual instead.

That judgements are non-inferential means, first of all, that there are no other mental states which we consciously rely on, when forming those judgements, as presenting us with premisses for the conclusion endorsed in those judgements.¹³ Perceptually based non-inferential judgements are therefore phenomenologically (or psychologically) immediate reactions to perceptual experiences of the objects concerned.¹⁴ It seems true that many aesthetic judgements are non-inferential in this sense. It need not take any conscious reasoning on our side to recognise the elegance of a gait, or the expression of sadness in a piece of music.

Now, assuming that we perceive aesthetic qualities can very well explain this phenomenological immediacy. But it is important to note that there are alternative ways of accounting for it. One here particularly relevant fact is that the lack of a conscious occurrence of inferential reasoning is compatible with any of the following possibilities: (i) that the judgements in question are based on some kind of non-conscious or implicit inferences; (ii) that we have acquired - and had to acquire - the ability to form judgements of this kind by going through explicit inferences and internalising (* or habituating, automatising) them; (iii) that we can actually form such judgements also by means of a conscious inference; and (iv) that the justification of these judgements is inferential, independently of whether they have actually been formed on the basis of an inference.

Consider the example of a good chess-player or mathematician. He or she may be able to immediately 'spot' the quality of moves, or how to proceed in a proof. But both had to engage in extensive reasoning in order to acquire and develop this skill. They had to get used to make the right rational connections within their field between a certain type of position or problem and the best response to it. Their current judgements need not be inferential any more, but they were not so in the past, and may be so in the future.

¹³*This is compatible with the fact that inference may in other ways be involved in, or necessary for, the recognition of the underlying non-aesthetic features?

¹⁴*Intuitive or spontaneous judgements are other examples of non-inferential judgements. - *Important here?

Moreover, their current judgements are still to be justified by reference to an argument which may be rehearsed by means of inferential reasoning. And it is perhaps also plausible to say that there are still some kind of inferential processes going on in their minds at the sub-personal level (*cf. psychological studies?).

Accepting that aesthetic judgements are phenomenologically immediate therefore does not rule out counting them as inferential in the genealogical, the justificatory or the sub-personal sense. Whether we actually should take them to be inferential in one or more of these additional senses, and whether this fits together with Sibley's argument against the possibility of aesthetic inference, is an issue to be addressed further below.

However, treating aesthetic judgements as historically, epistemically or non-consciously inferential is perhaps only the second best explanation of their phenomenological immediacy. In this respect, emotion- or intuition-based accounts are better rivals to perception-based ones. It remains to be seen what the difference between these last three views really amounts to (*) — especially in the light of the fact that aesthetic perception is not obviously understood as being sensory. The first (*) passage quote above illustrates, for instance, that Sibley assumes this form of perception to include '[feelings of] the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone' (cf. Sibley [2001b]:34, and the quote above).

What the perception-based account adds to the observation that aesthetic judgements are non-inferential is the denial of at least three of the four mentioned possibilities compatible with phenomenological immediacy. First of all, taking our canonical access to aesthetic qualities to be perceptual implies taking it to be genealogically and justificatorily non-inferential. If perceptual capacities are acquired at all, they are not acquired by means of inferential reasoning and a process of internalisation or habituation. And that perception provides non-inferential justification — despite being not uncontroversial — has been well argued for (cf., e.g., Peacocke [1992] and Martin [1992]). Whether perception can and does involve sub-personal inferences is partly an empirical matter.¹⁵ But even if the answer turns out to be positive, it is still true that this non-conscious inferences play no role in the rational motivation and justification of the resulting perceptual judgements and cannot become a conscious part of the perceptual experience. If they can be rendered conscious at all, they will form an independent instance of conscious reasoning, in addition to the perceptual experience.

This leads directly to the only possibility that the perception-based account can plausibly hold on to — namely that conscious inferential reasoning may conclude in the same judgemental ascription of aesthetic qualities than aesthetic perception. This is true even of the most basic perceivable features, which we do not perceive by perceiving some further, underlying properties. We can infer that something is red, for instance, once we know the wavelength spectrum of the light emitted by its surface in broad daylight (cf. Dorsch [2009]: ch. 2.6). Of course, this presupposes knowledge of the correlation between colours — or, more directly, colour experiences — and wavelength spectra. And discovering this correlation requires, ultimately, the conscious perception of colours. But this does not undermine the claim that our knowledge of the redness of the object at issue is inferential. It just shows that perception is our canonical access to colours, and that any other form of access finally depends on it.

¹⁵But only partly since it needs also to be considered, say, whether inferences are such as to be able to occur on the sub-personal level.

II.

Scepticism about the perceptual character of our access to aesthetic qualities may be expressed and supported in different ways.¹⁶ One option is to identify the general conditions on the perceivability of features and then to show that they are not satisfied by aesthetic qualities. Another alternative is to highlight certain facts about aesthetic qualities which are incompatible with their perceptual knowability. In this paper, I will not have the time to pursue the first strategy, which will have to wait for another occasion. Instead, I will adopt here the second strategy and, in particular, take as the starting point of my argument a specific feature of our aesthetics judgements which has been observed and emphasised by Sibley himself. The feature in question is that we can and should complement our ascriptions of aesthetic qualities by pointing to some of the underlying – and often non-aesthetic – properties of the objects concerned.

According to Sibley, aesthetic qualities depend for their instantiation on certain lower-level features of the objects concerned. In more detail, this means that the latter are responsible for the exemplification of the former and determine which particular aesthetic qualities are instantiated.¹⁷ Moreover, Sibley stresses the fact that we can supplement our aesthetic judgements by reference to these lower-level features, and that these features can count as reasons of some sort. One major aspect of our critical engagement with bearers of aesthetic qualities is therefore our ability and need to identify the relevant lower-level features and their significance for the exemplification of the aesthetic qualities in question (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 37ff.). Here is how Sibley summarises this point:

‘[...] we saw that there must be some (ultimately non-aesthetic) features responsible for any aesthetic quality. Another way of putting this is that there always is, and must be, some *reason* why a thing has that quality. 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.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 41f.)

It seems indeed difficult to deny that it is standard and legitimate to expect us to add to our aesthetic judgements by pointing to the underlying features responsible for the ascribed aesthetic qualities. We do not simply tell others, say, that we find a given painting balanced or pale, but draw their attention to the underlying symmetry of the design or the unsaturatedness of the colours. And if we are unable to follow the request of others to back up our judgements in this way, the quality of our judgements and, more generally, our status as a judge of aesthetic matters are diminished. Again, Budd’s idea that what matters is not merely the presence of aesthetic qualities, but also their particular realisation by the lower-level features of the objects concerned can explain why

¹⁶*I assume here that, if aesthetic qualities are perceivable, perception is our canonical way of acquiring knowledge about their exemplification... I also ignore any potential difference in scope between perception and perceptual knowledge: the latter may be wider than the former...

¹⁷*See Sibley [2001b]: 35f. There, he also notes two aspects of this determination relation: the aesthetic qualities depend on a whole set of lower-level features (if not on all lower-level features of the object in question), while some members of this set are ‘*notably* or ‘*especially* responsible’ for the aesthetic quality in question.

it is important and expected to be able to identify the latter and their link to the aesthetic qualities.

This highlights an important difference between aesthetic perception (as well as other forms of higher-level perception) and our basic perception of colours, smells, sounds, and so on. For it is unreasonable to demand of us to supplement our colour or similar judgements by referring to more fundamental features of the objects at issue. At best, we may be asked to elucidate why we take our respective perceptual experiences to be in order. This difference is perhaps best explained by reference to the fact that colours and similar properties — in contrast to aesthetic qualities — are not dependent on more basic *perceivable* features of their bearers. Given that seeing the redness of an object does not require noticing any of the unperceivable features responsible for that instance of redness, it is unreasonable to demand that the perceiver is able to identify those unperceivable features. As Sibley has correctly noted in the quoted passage above and elsewhere (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 38), we recognise aesthetic qualities, on the other hand, by recognising the perceivable features on which they depend.

The question is now, however, what kind of supplement — and therefore also what kind of quality or value of aesthetic judgement — is at issue here. It might seem natural to maintain that our awareness of the lower-level features provides us with epistemic reasons, that is, reasons for judging or believing objects to possess certain aesthetic qualities. The idea would be to take our reference to the lower-level features to supply us with epistemic support for our aesthetic judgements, possibly enabling us to acquire knowledge about the exemplification of aesthetic qualities by means of, say, some form of reasoning. But this would clearly go against the spirit of the perceptual approach, as Sibley himself acknowledges (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 39f.). If our ascription of the balance or paleness of a painting happens indeed in the form of a perceptual judgement, it cannot be a rational — or, indeed, inferential — response to seeing its symmetrical design or unsaturated colours.¹⁸ Therefore, since Sibley endorses this perceptual view, he is forced to maintain that reference to the underlying features cannot add anything to the epistemic rationalisation or justification of our aesthetic judgments.¹⁹ Accordingly, that the lower-level features are the reasons why something possesses a certain aesthetic quality does not mean that they also are — or provide us with — epistemic reasons for judgementally ascribing that aesthetic quality.

‘There is a familiar and important form of reason-giving, at least for the aesthetic judgements under discussion, which does not consist in citing properties of the work in propositions which *logically* support — that is, make certain or likely — the truth of the critic’s judgement.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 44)

‘[...] these are reasons why the *work* is graceful, and to be distinguished from reasons — good or bad, a critic’s or anyone else’s — for concluding or inferring that the work is graceful.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 41f.)

‘It is, then, a quite unwarranted assumption that, if a critic has noticed or

¹⁸*What about impact on the concepts employed as part of the perception of balance?

¹⁹*Schellekens’ problematic attempt to treat aesthetic judgements as perception-based, but non-inferential and non-perceptual. Cf. also the importance of distinguishing two kinds of ‘explaining reasons’: rationalisations of our thoughts vs. metaphysical realisation or causation.

discovered the reasons why something has a certain aesthetic quality and in *that* sense can cite reasons which support his judgement, he thereby has reasons the citing of which provide rational support for his judgement or show it to be reasonable.’ *A* may in fact *be* the reason why something is *B*, and yet the knowledge that that thing has *A* may provide *no* reason or justification for supposing that it has *B*.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 43)

The distinction appealed to in these passages is that between epistemic and (what may be called) metaphysical reasons. The first are reasons for forming a judgement or belief and are cited in the rationalisation and justification of the latter. The second, by contrast, are reasons (or facts) that are responsible for something being a certain way and thus may be used to explain why it is that way — in this case, why something possesses certain aesthetic qualities, and possibly also why it causes us to have certain responses.²⁰

Here, I possibly disagree with Elisabeth Schellekens’ interpretation of Sibley’s position. For her, his distinction is one between justifying and rationalising epistemic reasons, and not between epistemic and metaphysical reasons. It is important to note that there are at least two ways of understanding the idea of ‘explaining’ or ‘explanatory reasons’ (as Sibley himself labels the role of the lower-level features). On the one hand, they — or perhaps better, our awareness of them — may explain why someone has a certain belief or other rational state. In this sense, explanation is a rational relation involving a subject and some of her mental states. On the other hand, the reasons may explain — completely independently of any subjective perspective onto the world — why some aspect of the world is as it is. In this sense, explanation is a descriptive relation which highlights constitutional, causal or other metaphysical connections in the world. Schellekens seems to read Sibley as having reasons of the first kind in mind. For, according to her, recognising the lower-level features ‘[explains] why one might think that some thing has a certain property’ or ‘why one has made the judgement’ (Schellekens [2006]: 174, 170); and the resulting ‘process of rational reflection about features of the object of appreciation plays a part in the process by which the aesthetic judgements are held to be explained’ (Schellekens [2006]: 175).²¹

None the less, the passages of Sibley quoted above should make it clear that his own contrast his one between epistemic and metaphysical reasons, and not between two kinds of epistemic reasons. For him, reference to the lower-level features does not provide any form of rational support for aesthetic judgements, not even one that is capable of rendering the formation of the latter reasonable from the subject’s perspective. The task for Sibley is now to elucidate how reference to metaphysical reasons really adds something to our aesthetic judgements, moreover in such a way that we can reasonably demand it from good critics. If the perceptual approach fails to come up with a satisfactory answer, our practice to ask for the supplementation under consideration would remain unexplained or, even worse, would turn out to be inadequate.

^{20*}This distinction parallels a distinction between two different senses of ‘because’. It is not necessarily problematic that metaphysical reasons are facts, given that epistemic reasons may be facts as well.

²¹Only one passage suggests that she may mean metaphysical explanation, rather than rationalisation. There she says that ‘[t]he features responsible for a thing’s aesthetic character can only be viewed as explaining reasons for the phenomenal impression produced’ (Schellekens [2006]: 175). Assuming that ‘impression’ stands in for ‘perception’, what she takes to be explained here is the — presumably non-rational — causal occurrence of our perceptual awareness of aesthetic qualities.

Sibley's general proposal is that pointing to the lower-level features has explanatory force: it helps us to understand why and how the aesthetic qualities are realised in the object concerned.²² Of course, the explanation concerned is not of an epistemic nature: it does not answer the question of why — that is, for which epistemic reason — we have formed our judgements. Rather, he insists, it is an answer to the question of why — that is, for which metaphysical reason — the objects possess the aesthetic qualities ascribed in the judgements (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 36, 43). What Sibley has in mind here are therefore metaphysical explanations which single out the lower-level features responsible for the aesthetic qualities. To use some of his examples, the concentration of the blues and greys of a painting gives rise to and determines its unity of tone; and the sombre or indecisive character of a musical passage is due to a prominent change in key (cf. Sibley [2001b]: 36). The corresponding explanations are concerned with the emergence²³ and determination of aesthetic qualities by non-aesthetic features.

But, more specifically, how can the highlighting of metaphysical facts and formulating the corresponding metaphysical explanations be aesthetically relevant? Here is what Sibley writes:

‘Even when we have remarked the grace, unity, or ungainliness of something, we may yet be unable to say why it has these qualities. But a good critic should be able to point out what makes it so. Such explanations satisfy an interest and curiosity we often have about the aesthetic qualities of things (especially when the artist has achieved new effects or achieved something in an unusual way). But they may do more than this. When we see in detail how and why the work has its character, we may find our initial judgement strengthened and trust it more confidently. Moreover, as we come to realize how boldly or subtly, with what skill, economy, and exactness, the effect is achieved, how each detail is judged to a nicety and all work together with a fine precision, our appreciation is deepened and enriched and becomes more intelligent in being articulate.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 37)

‘The second [critical] activity I have in mind is less limited and more important than that of providing explanations for the aesthetic qualities one has already seen; it consists instead in helping people to see and judge for themselves that things have those qualities. [...] a major occupation of critics is the task of bringing people to see things for what, aesthetically, they are, as well as why they are.’ (Sibley [2001b]: 38)

Thus, Sibley singles out four different ways in which the reference to the realisation of aesthetic qualities by lower-level features may add something to our judgemental ascriptions of the former qualities: (i) it helps others to perceive the aesthetic qualities for themselves; (ii) it increases our confidence in our aesthetic judgements; (iii) it enriches our aesthetic

²²Although Sibley does not say anything about this, it seems plausible to include causal explanations as well - for instance, highlighting the fact that the lower-level features of objects are part of what is causally responsible for our awareness of the aesthetic qualities.

²³*Neutral about the precise nature of the metaphysical relation invoked. Sibley speaks of emergence (*), but (partial) constitution or realisation are other potential candidates for the relation between the two sets of properties.

experience and renders it more intelligible; and (iv) it satisfies a curiosity of ours which is distinctive of our aesthetic engagement with objects. The challenge is hence to make sense of how any of these four potential effects of noting the metaphysical connection between the two classes of properties can count as supporting or supplementing aesthetic judgements, assuming that they do not add anything to their epistemic justification. In particular, Sibley's perceptual approach faces two difficulties. First, it needs to elucidate the aesthetic relevance of these factors independently of any epistemic considerations. And second, it needs to account for the normative dimension of the reference to the lower-level features — namely that good critics should be able, when challenged, to identify these features and their impact on the aesthetic qualities.

III.

Let me begin with (i), Sibley's observation that pointing out the relevant lower-level features and their aesthetic significance may help others to recognise for themselves the aesthetic qualities realised by the former.²⁴ As far as it goes, this observation seems to be accurate. But it is compatible with a denial of the perceptuality of the mentioned recognition of aesthetic qualities, as well as with the postulation of a justificatory link between our awareness of the lower-level features and our judgemental ascriptions of the aesthetic qualities. Indeed, recognising the lower-level features and their contribution to the realisation of the aesthetic qualities may help us to notice the latter precisely because it provides us with a reason to ascribe the latter.

Furthermore, the observation cannot explain why we take the identification of the features realising the aesthetic qualities to add something of aesthetic relevance to the ascription of the latter. It has been elucidated how the identification may enable aesthetic judgements, but not how it may support or supplement them. In particular, our demand of good critics to be able to back up their judgements by pointing to the responsible lower-level features when challenged is distinct from our expectation of good critics to be able to make other people recognise aesthetic properties. The former concerns the task of convincing a sceptic about the aesthetic qualities ascribed, while the latter concerns the task of teaching people and improving their aesthetic sensibility.

It is true that one efficient way of convincing a sceptic is to get him to recognise the disputed aesthetic quality for himself. But it is not the only way and can neither be required, nor hoped for in response to a challenge to an aesthetic judgement. This is reflected by the fact that the educational function of the reference to the lower-level features is of no interest to someone who is already able to recognise the aesthetic quality concerned. By contrast, the explanatory and supportive function of that reference may still be very important for that person. For instance, she may be unsure about her own aesthetic judgement and may therefore feel the need to supplement it further by identifying the relevant lower-level features. Or she may disagree with the other about which such underlying features in fact realise the aesthetic quality.

Perhaps Sibley's idea (ii) — that referring to certain lower-level features in order to explain the presence of a particular aesthetic quality may increase our trust or confidence

^{24*} Cf. the common particularist strategy to substitute talk of 'reasons' with talk of '...'.

in our corresponding aesthetic judgement — can better account for this explanatory role. The situation envisaged by him is like this: we perceive, and judge, a passage of music to have a sombre character; we independently notice the change in key in the passage and link its presence to the presence of the sombre character; and noticing this link leads us to feel more confident about our judgement, and perhaps also more inclined to rely on our prior perception. The kind of confidence involved cannot amount to epistemic credence or trust. For the extent to which we, as rational beings, endorse a proposition in belief (if such an endorsement indeed comes in degrees) or take it to be justified is a matter of the epistemic reasons available to us. But as noted above, Sibley wants to deny that our knowledge of the metaphysical underpinnings of aesthetic qualities supplies us with epistemic reasons for believing in the exemplification of the latter.

Assuming that there is also no practical connection between the metaphysical explanation and the aesthetic judgement, the increase in confidence has therefore to consist in something like a merely causal influence on some non-rational feeling of confidence or certainty, or some non-rational disposition to rely on our aesthetic perception and judgement. Accordingly, there is nothing positive about the resulting strengthening of trust from a rational perspective. Indeed, it is in danger of rendering our aesthetic judgements epistemically inadequate. For it may actually decrease its epistemic standing (e.g., its likelihood of being true) by rendering us less critical and less responsive to opposing reasons. That is, we run the risk to hold on to our judgement for non-epistemic causes, namely an increased feeling of confidence or a strengthened disposition to trust. The gain of confidence need not necessarily have these negative consequences. But there is also no reason to assume that it has any positive effect, in the light of which it could count as adding something valuable to, or in support of, our aesthetic judgements.

As already noted above, understanding how aesthetic qualities are realised by the lower-level features of specific objects, on the other hand, may very well add something to our aesthetic experience of those objects. More specifically, it may enrich the latter by enabling us to fully appreciate the aesthetic value of the objects or to respond with adequate aesthetic emotions to them — thus offering the possibility of following Sibley's proposal (iii). However, as important as this enrichment might be, it does not affect the standing of our judgemental ascriptions of aesthetic qualities. At best, it bestows some value on our related, but distinct perceptually acquired knowledge of the realisation of the aesthetic qualities by the lower-level features. For it is the latter — and not the former — which is relevant for the possible occurrence of aesthetic evaluations and emotions.²⁵ So there is no obvious sense in which the possible enrichment of aesthetic experience, that comes with aesthetic perception, adds something positive to the status of the perceptually based aesthetic judgements also involved in that experience.

This leaves us with aspect (iv) of Sibley's account of the impact of metaphysical reasons on aesthetic judgements: the satisfaction of a distinctively aesthetic kind of curiosity. Sibley's idea appears to be that we have a specifically aesthetic interest in coming to know which lower-level features are responsible for the aesthetic qualities of an object, and how the former contribute to the determination of the latter. And satisfying this kind of curiosity is taken to support or supplement our aesthetic judgements, albeit not by adding

²⁵Note that the considerations above have shown (*) that the judgemental ascription of aesthetic qualities is independent of this additional knowledge.

to the latter's epistemic justification. It seems undeniable that our desire to understand artworks and similar objects includes that we care about knowing how aesthetic qualities are realised by relevant lower-level features — and not seldomly more than about knowing that the aesthetic qualities are instantiated in the first place. When considering artworks with a high degree of originality, say, our critical activity typically focusses less on the relatively unspecific fact that they are original, and more on the precise ways in which they manage to be so. And this is in part due to the fact that there may be much more disagreement on the latter than on the former.

Once we compare this aesthetic type of curiosity with its scientific counterpart, however, the proposal turns out to be problematic. The main difficulty is to delineate our kind of interest distinctively linked to aesthetic judgement and experience, as well as to get clear in which sense its satisfaction might add something to our aesthetic judgements.

When we engage with artworks on our own or talk about them with others, we may refer to the lower-level features of the works for various reasons, not all of which are concerned with the appreciation of their aesthetic value, or with the explanation of why they possess their aesthetic qualities. Painters may be curious about the kind of paint used because they are impressed by its duress (*) and want to try it out for themselves. Historians may be interested in the type of wood of a painting's frame in order to get clearer about how, and why, people at that time used different kinds of wood for different purposes. And geologists or biologists (*) may have the same interest because they study the development of distribution/presence of tree types (*) in the region where the painting was made. But these are not²⁶ cases of aesthetic curiosity, but rather of practical, historical or another form of interest. Even when we are aiming to understand the metaphysically explanatory link between lower-level features and aesthetic properties, this need not happen because of any aesthetic interest in the object in question. A metaphysician worrying about the ontological status of aesthetic properties or artworks may concern himself with the relation of determination holding between the non-aesthetic and the aesthetic in the hope that this will shed light on some of his philosophical problems.

Moreover, we do not care about all possible metaphysical explanations of the presence of aesthetic qualities. When we realise that the harmony of a painting is partly due to the fact that the gestures and postures of the depicted characters are roughly paralleled by elements of the landscape, such as trees or roads, we do not care about how much the respective lines in fact diverge from being straight lines or true parallels. Or when we recognise that the dramatic nature of a piece of music is partly a matter of a continuous and rhythmic low pitch sound, we are not really captivated by the additional knowledge of the specific length of the sound waves, or of the precise intervals of the rhythm specified in milliseconds. None the less, these latter facts about the piece of music, just as the actual angle between the lines on the painting, may very well be used, from a metaphysical perspective, to account for the harmonious or dramatic characters of the works. Even more extremely, the harmony of the painting - and most of its other aesthetic qualities - depends (*) on the specific nature and distribution of the molecules making up the paint on the canvas. But we do not pay attention to this fact while experiencing and appreciating

²⁶*Or not directly: we may use our knowledge about the type of wood, for instance, to determine the age and thus the originality of the painting; but the historians or geologists will not care too much about the latter.

the painting. Our aesthetic curiosity has certain limits with respect to the metaphysical explanations of how aesthetic qualities are realised by lower-level features.

It is true that, when we are aiming to fully appreciate a painting, we may be interested in physical facts about the wooden panel or the paint used which tell us something about the age of the work; or in the results of an X-ray investigation which reveal us something about the development of the artist's ideas during the process of painting. But we normally do not care about the precise length of the light waves reflected by the coloured canvas, or about the molecular structure of the oil used in mixing the paint. The respective facts strike us as aesthetically irrelevant, as not in any way enriching our understanding of the work. Similarly, there may be future artworks the recognition of the aesthetic properties of which requires us to study the reflectance properties of their surfaces, or their atomic composition. But even then, there will be metaphysical facts - for instance, about the subatomic particles - which we need not care about from an aesthetic perspective. A scientist, on the other hand, has any interest to keep on investigating, given that his goal is to fully comprehend the nature and origin of the objects concerned. It is here that we find a central difference between aesthetic and scientific curiosity. The latter is not restricted to certain metaphysical truths and explanations. From a scientific point of view, it is interesting to find out as much as possible about the constitution and causal powers of things. In contrast, our aesthetic curiosity is limited, once it comes to metaphysical issues.

Now, once we address the question of why we are aesthetically curious only about some facts about the realisation of aesthetic qualities, and not others, the problematic status of Sibley's fourth proposal — and indeed of the perceptual approach as a whole — becomes apparent. My aim is to show that it does not have the resources to provide a satisfactory explanation of the limits of our aesthetic interest.

Sometimes, our aesthetic curiosity stops at the level of perceivability: we may care only about those explanations which trace back the aesthetic qualities to perceivable lower-level features. But this need not always be so. As already mentioned (*), many aesthetic qualities depend directly on unperceivable features of their bearers, and we are aesthetically interested in the respective metaphysical knowledge. We do care, for instance, about the usually unperceivable age of a painting because it tells us something about its originality.²⁷ And many aesthetic qualities of novels depend on non-aesthetic features - such as the meaning of its words, or the elements of its story-line - which we cannot perceive and have to grasp intellectually.

Similarly, it is imaginable that there may be forms of art which we are supposed to appreciate by means of microscopes, or special hearing aids which render otherwise unperceivable sound waves accessible. And it is not clear whether such a kind of access to the relevant lower-level features would still count as perceptual. One elegant way of dealing with these last cases might be to treat the mentioned tools, or their effects, literally as part of the artwork. Thus, the perceivable parts of the piece would be the microscopic images or sound waves produced by the instruments - or, at least, the image- or sound-producing mechanisms. But the artists concerned need not intend the latter to be part of their works. And it is doubtful that we could establish a satisfactory theory of which elements belong to certain artworks of certain types, that could rule out the possibility of

²⁷*There is perhaps a complication here since 'originality' is typically not used purely descriptively.

artworks which are accessible only via microscopes and the like, but do not contain the latter or their perceivable products as their parts.

Most importantly, noting that our aesthetic interest is, in certain cases, restricted to perceivable lower-level features and their contribution to aesthetic qualities would not amount to a very illuminating characterisation of the limitation of aesthetic curiosity. For it would still be in need of explanation why our interest might then not extend, say, to unperceivable lower-level features. For the same reason, the limitation of aesthetic curiosity cannot be accounted for in terms of the idea that it is concerned merely with what enables and enriches more complex and emotional aesthetic experiences. For, again, this would just shift the explanatory burden since we would then need to say why this limited concern might be in place, without simply falling back on option (iii) discussed above.

Another possible answer is that we are interested only in those metaphysical facts which we actually manage to explanatorily link up with the aesthetic qualities. Knowing the precise angles of the nearly parallel lines or the molecular structure of the paint may not mean much to us because we do not recognise their contribution to the harmonious or garish character of the painting. And learning something about the wavelengths and temporal intervals may remain aesthetically uninteresting for us if it does not help us to make sense of the dramatic nature of the music.

But the problem with this proposal is that the acquisition of the missing understanding normally does not undermine our impression that reference to features like the molecular structure is aesthetically beside the point. Coming to know the exact angles of the lines in the painting may tell us why they are approximately parallel. And from a purely scientific point of view, this additional information is interesting and illuminating, at least to some extent. But it does not add anything to our aesthetic understanding of why the painting is harmonious. Knowing that the lines are approximately parallel suffices here already. Similarly, that the garishness of the painting is ultimately due to the molecules of paint on its surface is aesthetically irrelevant, even if we know how the latter contribute to the brightness and purity of the colours responsible for the former.²⁸

A third and final option for Sibley is to maintain that our aesthetic curiosity is limited to those lower-level features, noticing which helps us to recognise the respective aesthetic qualities — of course without providing us with epistemic reasons for our aesthetic judgements. However, this would mean that we would lose or fail to develop this interest in the lower-level features, if we came or were already able to recognise the aesthetic qualities in question. For instance, once we got the other party to recognise the aesthetic qualities at issue by pointing them to suitable lower-level features, the latter would stop being of any help for us and would therefore cease to be relevant for our aesthetic experiences. But this is obviously not the case in real aesthetic disputes. Even if there is agreement on the presence of a certain aesthetic quality, we may still refer to some lower-level features in support of our aesthetic judgement — in fact, we may still disagree about reference

²⁸Importantly, the limitation of aesthetic curiosity concerns not merely our (rather trivial) knowledge *that* the exact angles of the lines or the molecular structure of the paint determine the aesthetic qualities of the painting, but also our (very substantial) knowledge of *how* the former realise the latter — or at least how they realise the approximate parallelity of the lines or the brightness and purity of the colours, which again realise the latter.

to which lower-level features is of justificatory importance. The problem is thus that the proposal under consideration treats our curiosity as purely pragmatic. In particular, it ignores the fact that there is a link between the aesthetic qualities and the underlying lower-level features, and that this link is of significance for why identifying the latter may provide support for ascribing the former.

So the challenge for the adherent of the perceptual view — namely to provide us with a satisfactory specification of our distinctively aesthetic interest in certain, but not all, of the lower-level features underlying aesthetic qualities — is still unanswered. The conclusion should be that Sibley’s account does not have the resources to dispel the worries that a perceptual approach cannot make sense of how identifying the metaphysical connection between the two kinds of properties can provide some form of non-epistemic support for our aesthetic judgements.

IV.

Once we reject the idea that we perceive (or feel, intuit, etc.) the higher-level properties in question, this problem does not arise any more. For the alternative inferential account can maintain that, when referring to the lower-level features in aesthetic debates, we are interested in proper justification — namely in the evidential impact of our recognition of the lower-level features on the occurrence and epistemic standing of our aesthetic judgements. This interpretation of our practice of demanding and providing support for our aesthetic judgements in terms of lower-level features can indeed explain the limits of our aesthetic curiosity. The thought is that only those lower-level features matter for us, the awareness of which provides us with a reason for (or against) our ascription of the aesthetic qualities concerned. And we are aesthetically interested in these — but not other — lower-level features precisely because identifying them may help us to improve and solidify our aesthetic judgements and, as a consequence, also to advance the other elements of aesthetic experience.

The inferential account still faces the problem of accounting for the phenomenological immediacy of our aesthetic judgements, though.²⁹ And this may motivate one to consider the possibility of combining the perceptual view with the idea — rejected by Sibley — that the recognition of suitable lower-level features may give us some kind of epistemic support for our awareness of the corresponding aesthetic qualities. In a recent essay, Elisabeth Schellekens endorses the need to interpret our reference to the lower-level features in such justificatory terms.³⁰ But she also wants to hold on to the perceptuality of our access to aesthetic qualities. The result is a hybrid account according to which our aesthetic judgements may be based not only on perceptions of the aesthetic qualities, but also on considerations of the relevant lower-level features — notably non-aesthetic features.

‘Whereas our perception of [a] building’s elegance seems unmediated or instantaneous rather like the perception of redness — we ‘see’ the elegance — our judgement to the effect that the building is indeed elegant may be understood to follow from the perception that it is so and also from our reflection

²⁹*Another problem: no principles

³⁰*ref

on various salient features of that building.’ (Schellekens [2006]:175f.)

‘Such an account relies on the possibility of appealing to an object’s salient features in order to check [...] whether our aesthetic judgement is well founded. [...] The idea of such a justification playing a more prominent part in our account of aesthetic epistemology, then, is not intended to suggest that aesthetic perception should be discarded, but merely that a reasonable objectivism for aesthetic judgements stands little chance of getting off the ground if the perceptual model is taken as our chief and only guide.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 177)

This raises the question, however, of the specific epistemic support that the recognition of the lower-level features and their metaphysical connections to the aesthetic qualities is meant to provide. Schellekens is adamant that it is not inferential, at least not to such an extent that the presence of the lower-level features might put us into the position to infer the presence of the aesthetic qualities. For she wants to follow Sibley in his rejection of the inferential model and in his insistence that perception is always necessary for forming a justified aesthetic judgement (cf. Schellekens [2006]: 176).³¹

‘I may form the judgement ‘x is graceful’, and my judgement may involve my scrutinizing x in an attempt to isolate some explaining reasons, but that is not to say that the presence of the features serving that role are in themselves sufficient for me to infer that x is indeed graceful now or at any other time. This is so because the aesthetic perception prompting the judgement forms a necessary part of its grounding. And for the reason that this perception still retains its non-inferential and purely aesthetic character, there is no genuine inference from non-aesthetic to aesthetic to be found.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 176)

‘To use Sibley’s scheme whereby ‘A’ refers to a non-aesthetic feature and ‘B’ an aesthetic quality, it is not because we know A that we perceive B; but we can say that because we perceive B and know, or come to know A, we can judge that ‘x is B’.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 176)

Accordingly, what enables us to form judgemental ascriptions of aesthetic qualities are both our perceptions of these qualities and our awareness of the lower-level features. This might be understood as suggesting that our aesthetic judgements are none the less the result of an inference — though not from our recognition of the lower-level features alone, but instead from this recognition plus the perception of the aesthetic qualities. But Schellekens is right in not promoting such an interpretation. One of the problems with this view is that it treats perceptual evidence in aesthetic matters as insufficient for the rational motivation of corresponding judgements and, hence, as in need of supplementation by some further considerations.³² For if perceiving an aesthetic quality were already enough for us

³¹Schellekens seems to endorse also Sibley’s stronger claim that perception is required even for the formation of non-justified aesthetic judgements (*cf. discussion above).

³²The assumption that the perception of aesthetic qualities is necessary for aesthetic judgement, despite of the epistemic relevance of our recognition of the lower-level features, is also problematic (cf. above *). We have no problems to infer the presence of certain shapes or colours on the basis of information about physical properties of the objects at issue, despite not currently perceiving them. And a further difficulty

to be moved and entitled to ascribe it to the object concerned, it would become mysterious why this rational process should be replaced by a form of reasoning that is richer than the perception in question. However, there is no reason to assume that aesthetic perception should differ from normal perception in that it does not provide us with sufficient epistemic reasons for judgement. Not surprisingly, Schellekens conception of the epistemic role of the reference to the lower-level features is different:

‘Perhaps, then, it would be better to understand an aesthetic perception as that which provides the experiential grounding of an aesthetic judgement, and an aesthetic judgement as that which reports on a perception. Thus a judgement may be allowed to involve a set of reflections — reflections most probably prompted by the perception but not, strictly speaking, part of that aesthetic perception itself — concerning features of the object of aesthetic appreciation. Some of those features may be considered relevant to the thing’s aesthetic character, and can thus lead us to confirm our perception in the form of a judgement.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 175f.)

‘Such an account relies on the possibility of appealing to an object’s salient features in order to check whether our aesthetic perception is well grounded [...]’ (Schellekens [2006]: 177)

So the formation of aesthetic judgements may be a process with three stages: (i) we perceive a certain aesthetic quality; (ii) this perception gets confirmed by the recognition of suitable lower-level features that explain the presence of that aesthetic quality; and (iii) we report on our confirmed perception in the shape of an aesthetic judgement. Schellekens does not seem to take step (ii) to be necessary, in contrast to step (i) and, obviously, step (iii). Moreover, she insists that step (ii) has to happen epistemologically — if not also temporally — after step (i) and, in some sense, as a response to the perception. For otherwise, the complex inferential model sketched in the last paragraph (*) would not be excluded.

‘[...] the account I am exploring need not involve picking up on a handful of non-aesthetic features, and from there inferring the presence of an aesthetic one. The direction of this exercise is rather the reverse, namely one of going from the aesthetic to the non-aesthetic.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 176)

‘The account would have to ensure that the distinctively aesthetic element always comes into play before we look for any salient non-aesthetic features. That way, Sibley’s keenly felt and entirely proper worry about inference may be avoided without giving up the possibility of some kind of rational justification.’ (Schellekens [2006]: 177)

What is most striking about this view, however, is the idea that the identification of the relevant lower-level features has the primary purpose to confirm the perception of the aesthetic qualities — and not their judgemental ascription. But why are our aesthetic

is that the scope of perception does not obviously extend to all or even some kinds of higher-level features — an issue which has, however, to be addressed some other time.

perceptions and — indirectly — also our perceptually based aesthetic judgements in need of such a confirmation? And what specific kind of rational support does this confirmation provide? Schellekens owes us satisfactory answers to both questions, and it is not obvious how her position allows her to give us some.

The situations in which we require or provide additional support for our perceptually based ascriptions of non-aesthetic properties are rare. Only if we have some doubts about our perceptual experiences or are challenged by an opposing opinion do we feel the need to say more about the issue of whether, say, something is really red, or a bottle. But, as already noted above (*), aesthetic debates arise also in more normal circumstances, even when all parties agree on the aesthetic qualities present and do not question the satisfaction of the general conditions on proper perception and rationality. So we need an account of why reference to the lower-level features matters epistemically also in the latter situations.

If we assume that the rational backing of this reference — in conjunction with the perception — is inferential, we could explain why it is needed: it forms an essential part of the inferential motivation and justification of the judgements. But this is not the view recommended by Schellekens. In particular, the identification of the lower-level features is not necessary for the formation of aesthetic judgements and provides direct support for the perceptions, and not the judgements. So how else could we understand the kind of confirmation involved, such that it becomes clear why it is relevant even under circumstances when neither the truth of our aesthetic judgements, nor the normality of our epistemic position is challenged? Perhaps coming aware of the lower-level features and their contribution to the realisation of the aesthetic qualities increases our feeling of confidence or certainty. But as argued above (*), this impact would not be epistemic in nature and possibly threatening the good standing of the judgements concerned.

The simplest reply is, of course, to specify the kind of rational support in terms of the claims of the theory: it consists in the provision of an epistemic reason which does not suffice to ground judgements on its own, but which can confirm perceptions. But apart from the fact that this postulation of the existence of such a form of backing sounds like a mere stipulation, there are three deeper difficulties with it.

First, it is left unexplained how the recognition of lower-level features, which is not sufficient to ground aesthetic judgements, can provide support for the sufficiency of perceptions of aesthetic qualities to ground those judgements. It might perhaps be replied that the awareness of the lower-level is not meant to play such a strong epistemic role. But the only thing that matters with respect to the epistemic status of particular perceptions is whether they are actually sufficient to justify corresponding judgements. Hence, if the identification of the lower-level features cannot confirm the sufficiency of the perceptions' rational power, it has no bearing on their epistemic standing. In other words, if something can confirm that a given perception can justify a certain judgement, then it should also be able to confirm the judgement on its own.

Second, it is doubtful whether perception is at all open to epistemic criticism and support in the proposed way. When the perception of colours and shapes is concerned, our practice of challenging and defending an instance of it may focus on two different kinds of factor. On the one hand, it may be concerned with the general suitability of the viewing conditions or the viewing subjects (e.g., whether their minds work properly

or whether they possess the required concepts). The corresponding considerations do not point to the lower-level features of the perceived object and can therefore be ignored here. On the other hand, what may be at the centre of the debate are additional agreeing or opposing opinions — that is, other ways of accessing the same object and its colour or shape properties. One option is that we may question or bolster the standing of a given perceptual experience by considering the perceptual experiences of other subjects, or of the same subject at different times. But again, this has no bearing on the current discussion, since the lower-level features still play no role.

This is different in cases where the comparative (*) colour or shape judgements are not formed in response to perceptions (or feelings, intuitions, etc.) of the specific property instances under consideration. We may, for instance, know that the presence of certain surface reflectance properties or certain geometrical features is generally a good indicator for the presence of certain colours or shapes. And this piece of knowledge may enable us to infer the colour or shape of the object in question on the basis of recognising that it possesses the corresponding lower-level features.³³ Moreover, in cases where we lack such connecting knowledge, reference to the reflectance or geometrical properties remains entirely irrelevant for the assessment of the epistemic status of our colour or shape experience. If we perceive something as being red, saying that it also shows a certain reflectance property does not tell us anything about the standing of our red experience and the resulting judgement, unless we know whether this particular reflectance property is linked to the colour red or to some other colour. It follows that any confirmation of our respective perceptions in terms of the lower-level features presupposes that we can infer the presence of the perceived properties from the presence of the underlying features.

But, according to the view under discussion, this is not the case in the recognition of aesthetic qualities, given that the possibility of such an inference is rejected by Schellekens (as well as Sibley). Consequently, the proposed kind of confirmation cannot be modelled upon any of the various forms of confirmation present in the case of the perception of colours, shapes and similar properties. This should already suffice to cast serious doubt on its availability in the case of aesthetic perception, given that it is unclear on what it could be modelled instead, or whether we have any independent reason to assume its existence. But the preceding considerations highlight another strange fact about the kind of epistemic support put forward by Schellekens. While we can acquire inferential knowledge about the colour or shape of a given object, we are said to be unable to do the same with respect to aesthetic qualities. However, if at all, it should be the other way round. Colours and shapes are among the most basic perceivable properties, both in the sense that we do not perceive them by perceiving some other features, and in the sense that backing them up by reference to lower-level features is a highly unusual practice. Normally, pointing to the fact that we ascribe a certain colour or shape to an object because of how we perceptually experience it suffices to fulfil the demands of reasonable challenges. By contrast, aesthetic qualities are not basic in these two senses. In particular, it is normally not enough to

³³*Of course, the knowledge of such correlations is ultimately to be derived from perceptual knowledge. But once we possess it, we can come to know about the colours and shapes of things simply on the basis of learning about their underlying physical properties. If it turns out that the former are identical with the latter, just pick some other lower-level features which realise the reflectance or geometrical properties. But note that there are serious problems with reducing colours to reflectances (cf. Dorsch [2009]: ch. 4), and that perceivable shapes are likely to only approximate geometrical shapes (* cf. Wright, Hilbert).

silence a challenge simply by claiming to have perceived the aesthetic quality in question. But this difference suggests that the inferential model applies more naturally to aesthetic qualities than to colours and shape.³⁴

Third, the proposed account is forced to accept the problematic implication that the awareness of relevant lower-level features speaks in favour — albeit in an indirect and insufficient way — of the corresponding aesthetic judgement. There is no way in which the reference to the lower-level features could confirm the general suitability of the viewing conditions or the viewing subject. Instead, it has to provide support for the presentation of a specific aesthetic quality and defend it against conflicting opinions which ascribe other qualities to the object in question. But if it confirms the aesthetic perception solely with respect to its presentation of a certain aesthetic quality (and not another), then it should also be able to confirm the corresponding judgement about that quality. That one of the presentations is perceptual and the other judgemental does not really matter here. Hence, the identification of the lower-level features should be taken to support, not only the aesthetic perceptions, but also the aesthetic judgements.

One problem with this implication is, however, that it threatens to undermine the rational difference at the heart of the difference between perceptions and judgements. What is distinctive of the two kinds of mental episode is that the latter are responsive to epistemic reasons and thus open to rational revision, while the former are not. But if both can indeed be supported in their epistemic standing by the same kind of (partial) epistemic reasons, we need an explanation of how this support is compatible with both the absence and the presence of rational responsiveness.³⁵

It also needs to be explained why nothing additional may render this support sufficient for the formation of justified aesthetic judgements. That there is no such thing according to Schellekens' view should be clear. Adding the perceptions of aesthetic qualities to the recognition of the lower-level features does not lead to a sufficient inference base. And other, non-perceptual reasons may come into play only if it is accepted that the perceptions are not necessary for the formation of aesthetic judgements.

A final, related challenge is to render plausible the idea of a kind of (partial) confirmation that can support a particular aesthetic judgement indirectly by confirming the respective perceptual presentation of a specific aesthetic quality, but not directly and independently of such a perception. There is no good reason to assume that the identification of the lower-level features, which does speak in favour of the corresponding aesthetic judgement, should not be able to do so even in the absence of any perception of the aesthetic quality at issue. In particular, its supportive power cannot depend on the perception, since it is meant to confirm that perception. The main problem seems to be, again, that the proposed form of confirmation has to concern the presentation of a specific aesthetic quality, whether the latter is perceptual or judgemental.

To conclude, Schellekens' view does not seem to be better equipped than Sibley's to avoid the tension between the claim about the perceivability of the higher-level aesthetic

³⁴* Cf. the traditional retreat to the principle of acquaintance as highlighting an anomaly in the aesthetic case (cf. also the alleged asymmetry with testimony). But as argued above, not necessary to accept this idea of an anomaly.

³⁵Note that the situation is very different with the reasonableness of emotions or instrumental desires, given that both phenomena are at least to some considerable extent responsive to reasons.

qualities and the idea of some kind of support of the corresponding judgements in terms of relevant lower-level features. It is also not easy to see how some other perceptual theory of our canonical access to such higher-level properties could do better than the two discussed in this essay. Perhaps we should therefore start to look for an alternative account of the phenomenological immediacy of our ascriptions of higher-level features to perceived objects. However, whether an inferential account is indeed a better alternative remains to be seen. Possibly our perceptually based recognition of higher-level properties requires an altogether different epistemological approach.³⁶

References

- John Bender. General but defeasible reasons in aesthetic evaluation: The generalist/particularist dispute. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53(4):379–92, 1995.
- Malcolm Budd. *Values of Art*. Penguin, London, 1995.
- Malcolm Budd. Aesthetic judgements, aesthetic principles and aesthetic properties. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 7:295–311, 1999.
- Malcolm Budd. The acquaintance principle. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43(4):386–392, 2003.
- Fabian Dorsch. Sentimentalism and the intersubjectivity of aesthetic evaluations. *dialectica*, 61(3):417–46, 2007.
- Fabian Dorsch. *Die Natur der Farben*. Ontos, Frankfurt, 2009.
- Robert Hopkins. What is wrong with aesthetic testimony? forthcoming.
- David Hume. Of the standard of taste. In Eugene Miller, editor, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*. Liberty, Indianapolis, 1985.
- Immanuel Kant. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1990.
- M. G. F. Martin. The rational role of experience. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 93:71–88, 1992.
- Alan Millar. The scope of perceptual knowledge. *Philosophy*, 75:73–88, 2000.
- Christopher Peacocke. *A Study of Concepts*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992.
- Elisabeth Schellekens. Towards a reasonable objectivism for aesthetic judgements. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46(2):163–177, 2006.

³⁶This paper has been presented at one of the *eidōs* meetings at the University of Geneva, as well as at the University of Fribourg and at University College London. I would like to thank all participants at those occasions for their comments, notably Philipp Keller, Vincent Lam, Stephan Leuenberger, Mike Martin, Andrew McGonigal, Kevin Mulligan, Gianfranco Soldati, Gian-Andri Toendury, Jonathan Wolff and Christian Wüthrich. I am also grateful for the financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation who funded the research for this paper as part of a project on ‘Properties and Relations’ at the University of Geneva (SNF project 113688).

Frank Sibley. Aesthetic concepts. In *Approach To Aesthetics: Collected Papers On Philosophical Aesthetics*, pages 1–23. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001a.

Frank Sibley. Aesthetic and nonaesthetic. In *Approach To Aesthetics: Collected Papers On Philosophical Aesthetics*, pages 33–51. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001b.

Frank Sibley. General criteria and reasons in aesthetics. In *Approach To Aesthetics: Collected Papers On Philosophical Aesthetics*, pages 104–118. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001c.