

# The Relevance of Empirical Findings for Aesthetic Evaluation

fabian.dorsch@uclmail.net

June 2010

(First draft; please do not circulate.)

## 1 Introduction

Engaging in philosophical aesthetics means, to a considerable extent, also engaging in other and, in some sense, more fundamental disciplines of philosophy, such as metaphysics, epistemology or the philosophy of mind.<sup>1</sup> Which ontological category paintings, novels or performances of music belong to should be influenced by considerations about their status as artworks and about our aesthetic experiences of them. But it is, ultimately, a metaphysical question, to be answered before the background of a well-developed metaphysical theory. The same is true of, say, pictorial experience or our emotional or imaginative responses to fiction. Without a proper theory of visual experience, emotion or imagination, it is not possible to fully account for the former.

In so far as empirical investigations are relevant for certain issues in metaphysics, epistemology or the philosophy of mind, they are also relevant for the respective parts of aesthetics which contain those issues. The relevance is perhaps not the same since additional ‘aesthetic considerations’ — that is, considerations distinctive of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline — may heighten or weaken the importance of the empirical results concerned. But even if the latter turn out to be irrelevant in certain cases, this fact needs to be established by aesthetics. Hence, if (and this antecedent is by no means obviously satisfied) certain empirical studies or insights are indeed relevant for a satisfactory theory of a certain mental phenomenon, then

---

<sup>1</sup>It is interesting to ask whether there is also a general philosophy of normativity (e.g., of norms, reasons and values), which should then be included in this list. I am inclined to a positive answer, but such a general approach to normative phenomena has not really fully established itself yet — most debates focus on particular kinds of normative features, such as epistemic or moral ones.

aesthetics should take them into account when it is concerned with those mental phenomena. Accordingly, it is to be expected that philosophers interested, say, in pictorial experience should not only engage in philosophy of mind and, especially, philosophy of perception, but also have at least a serious look at what cognitive psychology has to say (or not to say) about this kind of experience. The question of whether empirical research is relevant for aesthetics, however, reduces in such cases largely to the question of whether it is relevant for the more basic philosophical discipline.

The topic of aesthetic value and of aesthetic evaluation seems to be different. At least, there is no well-established philosophy of normativity — that is, of norms, reasons and values in general, independently of particular types of them — which the debate about this topic should or could refer to. Hence, even if the issue of whether empirical findings are relevant for aesthetic evaluation is in fact just a special case of the more general issue of whether such findings are relevant for evaluation (or at least objective evaluation), we may for the time being address it more directly, that is, from within aesthetics.

Another, and perhaps related, difference is that, while phenomena like repeatable artefacts, pictorial experience or psychological engagement with stories are not distinctively aesthetic, aesthetic evaluation is. We may be confronted with abstract individuals, experience pictures or respond to stories in non-aesthetic contexts. Laws and sounds possess arguably the same ontological status as novels or pieces of music (Thomasson (1999)), but typically not the same aesthetic status. We experience traffic or emergency exit signs as depictions, without the resulting experience counting as an aesthetic experience. And something similar is perhaps also true of the emotional and imaginative engagement of members of a nation with some nation-defining myth (e.g., that of Wilhelm Tell). But the (seeming) recognition of the aesthetic value of something already suffices to establish an aesthetic context.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I intend to concentrate on the issue to which extent the results of empirical investigations may be relevant for aesthetic evaluation. The latter figures in aesthetics in at least two different ways. It may be the topic of investigation, or it may instead be the aim of investigation. In the first case, we are concerned with *philosophical aesthetics* and, more precisely, the philosophical debate about how best to account for aesthetic value and aesthetic appreciation. In the second case, we are concerned with *critical aesthetics* and, more precisely, the aesthetic assessment of a particular object or type of object. Philosophy and criticism do not differ merely in the generality of what they are about (e.g., all vs. some instances of aesthetic value). They also differ in how they approach the issue of aesthetic evaluation — in

---

<sup>2</sup>This indicates that what ultimately delineates the subject area of aesthetics is aesthetic value — just as what delineates the subject area of moral philosophy is moral value.

whether they investigate the nature of aesthetic value or, alternatively, the aesthetic nature of objects.

Empirical findings may be relevant for one or both forms of aesthetics; and they may be relevant for them in different ways. Within criticism, they may influence how we assess particular objects, or types of objects; and within philosophy, they may influence which account of aesthetic value and evaluation we prefer. My concern is with their relevance for the respective goals of aesthetics — that is, to which extent (if any) they should influence which account of aesthetic value and evaluation we prefer, and which aesthetic values we ascribe to particular (types of) entities. That they sometimes do influence our philosophical or critical activities is probably a truism, and not a particularly interesting one, for that matter. But whether they should do so is controversial and, moreover, very important for the development of our philosophical and critical practices.

Philosophers who ask whether empirical findings are relevant for the aesthetic assessment of objects are typically not concerned with the issue of whether our personal experiences of the works are relevant. Something similar is true, say, of art-historical or scientific studies limited to the particular artworks (like the dating of a painting, or X-ray pictures of it). Instead, the focus of attention is normally on more general and systematic scientific investigations — for instance, concerning the evolution of artistic practices or our psychological reactions to art. However — with the possible exception of our engagement with conceptual art or, more generally, ideas and theories — both our aesthetic experiences of artworks and our art-historical studies are clearly empirical in nature. That is, they are empirical — and not *a priori* — sources of knowledge. I briefly return to this aspect of aesthetic experience at the end of this essay. Until then, I partly follow tradition in restricting my discussion to empirical findings in a narrower sense, which excludes our own perception- and sensation-based experiences, but includes concrete art-historical and scientific knowledge about particular artworks.

## 2 Critical Aesthetics

Critical aesthetics is concerned with the aesthetic assessment of particular objects or types of objects. The appreciation of a single artwork is not the only — and perhaps even not the standard — example of criticism. We also evaluate groups of artworks in respect of the fact, say, that they belong to the same artist, period, style or genre. In addition, the objects of assessment need not be artistic or even artefacts. But I limit my discussion here to aesthetic criticism of artworks.

The latter may involve many different cognitive or active elements. First of all,

its goal is not merely to identify the aesthetic value of the objects concerned, but also to make sense of this value in terms of their other, less evaluative features. It is sometimes fairly easy to come to know whether something is an aesthetically good or bad work, but typically much more difficult to understand why this is so. This is reflected in a peculiar aspect of aesthetic evaluation — the fact that, in aesthetic matters, we should rely on our own experiences, rather than on the testimony of others.<sup>3</sup> Of course, we can come to know about the value of an object through listening to the opinions of others: we can come to know *that* it has this or that value. But even the best descriptions can rarely — if ever — give us sufficient access to *how* the object in question realises its value. Masterpieces have in common their aesthetic excellence. But they manage to be masterpieces in very different ways, rendering them very particular — or ‘unique’ — artworks. Moreover, what interests us is not always, or merely, the positive or negative aesthetic value of an object, but its specific realisation of that value. We would spend far less time with artworks if they would all be beautiful, say, in the very same way. Aesthetic criticism may differ in this respect from moral criticism, given that the latter seems to focus more (though also not exclusively) on the morality of the actions or persons concerned.

Another important element of criticism is that it involves the presentation and consideration of reasons for evaluation (e.g., reasons for admiring something, or for judging it to be a masterpiece). Part of our interest in the features which help to realise aesthetic value is that we can point to them in rational defense of our assessments. That we feel the need to do so, and demand of others to back up their evaluations as well, reflects the claim to objectivity inherent to aesthetic evaluation. We do not just let disagreements exist, we try to resolve them, partly because we assume in our own assessments that they are right, and all opposing ones wrong. Accordingly, the vindication of aesthetic evaluations has also the purpose to help others to recognise our perspective on the relevant features and their relationship to aesthetic worth. The understanding of why something has a certain aesthetic value is therefore not merely metaphysical, but also rational. Its object of knowledge are the properties of the object and their relations of realisation. But they are known in such a way that it becomes intelligible for us why it has the aesthetic value in question. The rational aspect explains, for instance, why we are not curious about all metaphysical facts about artworks when considering them from an aesthetic point of view. The nature and distribution of the molecules of a painting are presumably sufficient for its possession of a certain aesthetic value. But we are not interested in its molecular structure because it does not help us to make sense of the worth of the painting and, hence, to defend our assessment when challenged to do so by others

---

<sup>3</sup>See discussions about the principle of acquaintance (e.g., Budd (2003)) and the autonomy of aesthetic evaluations (e.g., Hopkins (2001)).

(cf. Dorsch (2010b)).

## 2.1 The normativity of aesthetic evaluation

Although criticism may very well involve other elements over and above evaluation and metaphysical and rational understanding, the latter are central to it, and I intend to concentrate exclusively on them. Empirical findings can possibly contribute to evaluation and understanding by identifying: (i) the value of the objects concerned; (ii) their other features; (iii) the relation of realisation between the features and the value; and (iv) the relation of intelligibility between the features and the value.<sup>4</sup> It seems indubitable that we have empirical access to the relevant other features of aesthetically valuable objects. We can see their colours and shapes, understand what they represent, come to learn about their history, or discover their hidden material features. But knowledge of them alone does not suffice for knowledge of the aesthetic values at issue. What is needed in addition is the recognition that the features realise a specific aesthetic value or, alternatively, that they provide good reason for the ascription of such a value.

This explains why it is not enough, say, to investigate the aesthetic preferences of people, or their tendencies to form certain aesthetic judgements. What any corresponding studies track is what people value, and not what is valuable. The recognition of the true values of objects requires also the ability to tell which of the noted evaluations are adequate. We can tell whether an evaluation is adequate in two ways: by considering the reasons for preferring it over other evaluations and then forming a rational conclusion about whether it is best supported; or by investigating the relevant features of the object and checking whether the evaluation assigns to it the value which the features realise. For both options, it is necessary to recognise the features concerned. But while the first treats them as reasons, the second treats them as realisers.

Consider the — rather loose — analogy with colours. Colour experience is not based on, or responsive to, reasons. But it still allows for a very similar dichotomy of methods. On the one hand, we may be able to tell whether a given colour experience is adequate by looking at the conditions under which it occurs — notably the illumination conditions and the state of mind of the person concerned. The thought is that sufficiently good conditions suggest adequacy. On the other hand, coming to know the reflectance profile of a surface enables us to predict its colour — assuming that the latter is relativised to normal human beings and may not be

---

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps it is not the features, but our experiences of them, which constitute the reasons. For the sake of simplicity, I assume here that the former is the case. Nothing in what follows should depend on this assumption.

properly perceived under suboptimal conditions (cf. Byrne and Hilbert (2003)). It is true that reflectance profiles may not be able to fix all qualitative aspects of colour, such as the location of unique hues (cf. Allen (2010)) or the colour similarities across surface, volume and light colours (cf. Dorsch (2010a)). But they suffice to determine the shade of colour to a very high degree. Hence, we can come to know about very (if not most) specific colours by means of carrying out relevant experiments in optical physics. So we have an independent route to the truth-value of a given colour experience.

When applied to aesthetic evaluation, the equivalent of the first option is to discover the rational relations which the relevant features of the object bear to its value. This means that we recognise the features as speaking in favour of a certain evaluation, rather than others. So the identification of the aesthetic value would ultimately amount to the identification of other features as aesthetic reasons. I return to this option in a moment. Before that, it is helpful to see why the second option is not applicable to the aesthetic case. The main reason for this is that we normally do not possess knowledge about which aesthetic value a set of given features does, or is likely to, realise (see the relevant well-known essays in Sibley (2001)). While we can deduce the colour of an object from its other features (e.g., its reflectance profile), we cannot do the same with the beauty of an artwork.<sup>5</sup> That is, we cannot bridge the gap from knowledge of the other features of an object to knowledge of its aesthetic value. We simply lack the required principles of inference.

What is important to note here is that the recognition of the features as reasons makes all the difference. Once we become aware of the fact that the features speak in favour of certain evaluations, we can balance the resulting reasons and endorse the assessment which they overall support. This is possible because of two differences between treating the features as realisers and treating them as reasons.

First, the former focusses on the metaphysical relation between the features and the aesthetic values, hence requiring knowledge of the laws governing this kind of realisation in order to ascribe the realised property on the basis of recognising the realising features. We need to know, say, which reflectance profiles are nomologically linked to which hues if we want to tell the colour of an object on the basis of discovering its reflectance properties. By contrast, the latter treatment concentrates on the rational (and epistemic) connections among the experiences of the various features concerned. All we need to be able to come to a rational conclusion about

---

<sup>5</sup>The only exception is perhaps that, if we know that a given artwork shares all its other features with another work, this suffices to conclude that it also possesses the same aesthetic value. But the corresponding principles are too concrete to be of any interesting practical use. And it is also not clear whether they should count as genuine principles in the first place (cf. Jackson, Pettit, and Smith (Jackson et al.)).

the aesthetic value of an object is to be rational and to recognise the features as reasons. Noticing that the elegance of an outline drawing of a face speaks strongly in favour of a positive evaluation, while its overemphasized realism supports a slightly negative assessment, it may be reasonable to judge that the drawing is somewhat beautiful.

Second, in contrast to following the route involving metaphysical knowledge, following the route involving rational balancing need not rely on principles involving the overall value of objects. It does not proceed deductively; and the forms of inference involved are typically not governed by principles — or at least not to a very large extent. When judging the number of participants in a demonstration, we may perhaps be able to start with the knowledge that it is higher than one hundred, and lower than one thousand. For a more precise informed guess, we have to rely on our various impressions of the mass of people in front of us (e.g., when we look at it from different angles), without the need for, or availability of, principles. Something very similar may happen when we experience an artwork and come to know its aesthetic worth by considering the rational force of its features. Our different impressions pull us in different directions. But reaching an equilibrium among them does not presuppose reliance on principles linking the features to the respective value.

It is perhaps possible to formulate — possibly hedged — principles which describe the contribution of particular features to the aesthetic value of an object — such as the principle that, everything else being equal, something elegant is beautiful, or the principle that something symmetrical possesses a positive aesthetic value (e.g., that of being balanced or harmonious). But empirical studies have difficulties to help us to discover or apply such principles. One particular problem is that, even if it turns out that a certain aesthetic value is always coextensional with a specific set of other features, this does not suffice to show that the objects concerned possess the value in virtue of instantiating those features. For instance, the opposite may be true; or the two kinds of property may be due to some third aspect of the objects at issue. Whether the features indeed realise the aesthetic value is, again, a matter of whether we can make sense of the presence of the latter in terms of the presence of the former. And this is for criticism to decide, and not for science.

Moreover, there is the problem that many aesthetic principles may only be valid in a hedged form — that is, relative to other things being equal. This raises the further question of when to apply these principles. Their adequate application presupposes the recognition of when things are in fact equal. This is, in particular, the case if the object does not possess any other aesthetically relevant features which outweigh or undermine the evaluative contribution of the features initially considered. But there is often no limit to the number of such potential competitors. An

elegantly drawn line may none the less be ugly for very different reasons — for instance, because of its colour scheme, aspects of the drawn figures, its background, or indeed its format. Empirical investigations can tell us that certain of these competitors are absent. But they cannot do so for all of them, assuming that the potentially defective colour schemes, drawn aspects, backgrounds or formats cannot easily be restricted to a finite number.

Accordingly, empirical findings cannot contribute much to the identification of reasons (rather than what we take to be reasons), nor to the explanation of how these reasons render the attribution of specific aesthetic values intelligible, given that both tasks are essentially concerned with intelligibility (or normativity). At best, they may help us to notice features of objects which we then recognise as reasons. Hence, recognising which features are aesthetically relevant, and how they are relevant, requires more than empirical studies: it requires rational aesthetic experience.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 The concreteness of aesthetic evaluation

But their normative dimension is not the only aspect of aesthetic evaluations which poses a serious problem for an empirical approach to aesthetic value. Another one is their concreteness, which becomes manifest in two facts. The first is that relatively small qualitative details may matter for the aesthetic value of an object. A slight dent in a line may undermine its elegance and, hence, the positive value of the respective simple line drawing. The second aspect of the concreteness of aesthetic evaluations is that not only the qualities, but also the particularity of objects may matter for their aesthetic worth. This may happen, for instance, in cases where the particularity of artistic expression becomes relevant. Artworks may be expressive of perspectives onto the world. That is, they may represent the values, emotions and opinions of (real or fictional) persons or characters. But, more fundamentally, they are expressions of the skills of the respective artist — of his or her insight, inventiveness, wit, sensibility, unoriginality or dilentatism. Part of why we value certain artworks may be that they are expressive of the specific skills of a certain artist. And appreciating artistic expression may require taking into account the particularity of the artist and his or her act of expression. For instance, it may matter whether a given Cubistic painting was made by Braque or Picasso.

Empirical research, however, is typically not concerned with particularity. Moreover, it can capture specific details only in exchange for generality. Studying the nature and context of an individual painting, say, by means of specific material or

---

<sup>6</sup>Whether the recognition of particular features as speaking for or against particular evaluations is underwritten by principles is an independent issue.

art-historical investigations (the former, for instance, involving X-rays or chemical analyses) may indeed help us to notice relevant facts about the painting. We may, for instance, discover the gesture which the depicted heroine was originally painted as making, and this may help us to better understand the meaning of the ultimately depicted gestures. But taking the concreteness of the painting into account in this way has the consequence that the observed results cannot be (easily) generalised to other paintings or artworks.

### **3 Philosophical Aesthetics**

When shifting attention from critical aesthetics to philosophical aesthetics, it is perhaps more plausible to expect that empirical findings do become relevant — not the least because philosophy — in contrast with criticism — is essentially concerned with general issues about aesthetic value. The following discussion concentrates on two particular attempts to establish the relevance of empirical aesthetics, namely by explaining our general aesthetic interests and sensibilities in evolutionary terms, and by showing that our aesthetic evaluations are heavily influenced by factors which more traditional theories of aesthetic value take to be irrelevant for — or even detrimental to — aesthetic appreciation.

Such empirical insights and considerations may supplement our existing philosophical accounts of aesthetic evaluation; or they may require a substantial revision of them. In what follows, I aim to show that the latter is much more difficult to establish than the former. But before entering the details of the discussion, it is worthwhile to stress that any revisionary consequences of empirical research for philosophy may also have an impact on criticism. If we are to change our general conception of what aesthetic value amounts to and how aesthetic evaluation should work, we also are to change the way in which we approach particular objects of aesthetic evaluation and assess them aesthetically. If we were wrong, for instance, to take aesthetic evaluation to be a rational phenomenon, then we should stop to assign such an important role to reasons and reasoning when evaluating specific artworks. And if it turns out that our appreciation of aesthetic skills ultimately amounts to an appreciation of skills favourable for survival or procreation, then we should perhaps treat artistic creation as much more mundane than we usually do (e.g., as on a par with other human achievements, such as those in sport or economy).

#### **3.1 Evolutionary accounts of artistic practices**

Some evolutionary psychologists have indeed argued that our interest in creating and appreciating art derives from sexual selection (cf. Miller (2000); see also Dutton

(2003) and Currie (2005)). While it is perhaps difficult to understand the creation and appreciation of art as an important factor for the survival of a species or particular members of it (with the possible exception of monetary issues), it does not seem unreasonable to explain the occurrence of artistic practices in terms of their role in the selection of suitable mating partners. Art displays the skills of the artist, such as creativity, intelligence, insight, empathy or perseverance. Some — if not all — of these skills are important in a relationship aimed at the successful upbringing of offspring. Moreover, art is a reliable indicator of their presence, given that it is not easy to create (what looks like) good art. Finally, the creation of art is very resourceful, suggesting that the artist has more than enough energy and skill to support himself: he has time for leisure and for producing seemingly useless things.<sup>7</sup> The tail of a peacock is an obstacle in its survival: it is difficult to carry around and attracts potential predators. So it is very impressive if a peacock with a large tail manages to survive and to parade (cf. Zahavi and Zahavi (1997)). Similarly, the appreciation of art — while taking up some resources on its own — is worthwhile since it increases the chance to find a mate of high quality with respect to procreation.

Considerations like these may very well explain why early humanity started to engage in artistic practices. But empirical facts about the origin of our current practices, however, do not automatically render those practices intelligible.<sup>8</sup>

First of all, the origin of a practice may be completely extrinsic to its contemporary significance for our lives. In many cases, we start to engage in a practice for reasons which do not speak in favour of pursuing the practice itself, but instead are concerned with some contingent consequences that this pursuit is likely to have. We want to be near and impress people (e.g., when we love them), please them or follow their role-model (e.g., when they are our parents), or present ourselves in a favourable light (e.g., when they are our boss, or some other figure with authority). Such motivations may lead us to go to the opera, attend all football games of a certain team, visit church regularly, or join others for a drink after work, without us taking enjoyment in those activities as such. But over time, it may happen that those practices become valuable for us in themselves, and we would continue to engage in them, even if our original motivations disappear.

Some such practices did not start with us, but with our ancestors. They changed religion, for instance, because of outside pressure. And this may explain, in a historical (or causal) sense, why we have been attending mass from our early childhood

---

<sup>7</sup>The situation changes, of course, once the creation of art becomes itself a means for survival — for instance, as a source of income. But this just strengthens the claim that what matters in our engagement with art is that it helps us to reach our evolutionarily determined goals.

<sup>8</sup>What becomes crucial here is perhaps the difference between history and genealogy (cf. Williams (Williams)).

onwards. It may indeed also shed light on why this ritual is important for us nowadays — for instance, when we continue to adhere to it as a manifestation of our sense of tradition or cultural conservatism. But this is not necessarily so. In fact, it may actually be the case that the practice is significant for us despite its history. Perhaps, for us, religion should never be a matter of tradition, but only of personal decision and faith.

Of course, the case of the evolutionary origin is different in that it concerns, at least to a large extent, factors beyond our own control or the control of cultural groups. But this does not prevent them from possibly becoming relatively irrelevant for our current practices. Indeed, it may render them even more removed from the latter. It is not easy to conceive of a way of making sense of the many different aspects of our evaluative engagement with art in terms of sexual selection, say. We have a fairly good understanding of the various reasons why people devote their lives to the creation of artworks — the need for self-expression, the challenge and satisfaction coming with creation, the simultaneity of the playfulness and the seriousness of art, the search for fame and wealth, and so on. Similarly, people spend time on experiencing art for very different reasons — such as curiosity about the human condition, more specific historical and art-historical interests, the search for real value and intellectual companionship, the need for entertainment or distraction, considerations about social status, and so on. Many of these motivations for actively or passively engaging with art are not easily linked to, or explained by, sexual selection.

Moreover, the motivations also differ greatly from case to case. Artists have very personal and particular reasons for producing art, and part of the value of their works may precisely be due to the fact that this specificity is reflected in them. Something similar is true of spectators who are sensitive of the concreteness of art and the artists, but typically not before the background of a personal interest in the artist as a potential candidate for mating (especially if the artist lived in the past). Of course, such an interest may still always be effective in some unconscious or subpersonal manner — as, perhaps, some psychoanalytic theories might claim. But to establish such a claim would require the collection of much more empirical data about what actually moves us to engage with art and would therefore go far beyond evolutionary psychology. And which data is relevant depends on whether it helps us to make sense of our current practices, or at least sheds new light on them — but from an aesthetic, and not merely from a biological point of view.

Besides, the insights of evolutionary psychology about our artistic practices cannot easily be transferred to aesthetic criticism. It is one thing to explain why people want to play football, but a completely different thing to judge when they play football well. Similarly, even if we have convincing explanation of why we engage in

our current artistic practices, it is far from clear why this explanation should have any bearing on how we assess the aesthetic worth of the artworks involved in those practices. Even if we admire a certain painting because it reveals the painter as a very skilled person who would be ideal for procreation, this does not suffice to establish that the artwork is of high aesthetic value — many other activities and their products can manifest skill and expertise to a similar extent.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 The rationality of aesthetic appreciation

One of the main problems with the conclusions of evolutionary psychologists has been that accounts of past developments cannot be easily applied to the present. Many other — and typically more confined — empirical studies avoid this difficulty by focussing on our current engagement with artworks or similar objects of aesthetic experience. For instance, some findings suggest that we tend to like wine more if we take it to be relatively expensive — even if we can claim some considerable expertise in matters of wine (cf. Plassmann et al. (2008)). Others indicate that our experience of a wine is heavily influenced by whether we take the wine (rightly or wrongly) to be white or red (cf. Brochet (2001)). And, again, others illustrate that we prefer certain Impressionist paintings over others relative to our — possibly unknown — familiarity with them (cf. Cutting (2006)).<sup>10</sup>

To start with the last example, it cannot be so easily concluded that familiarity tends to lead only to *positive* aesthetic evaluations. As far as I can tell, the studies were done with relatively unknown, but aesthetically valuable Impressionist paintings. Thus, it still has to be seen whether the experiments would have the same results if other genres and, especially, really bad paintings would be used. It is less obvious whether the studies about the impact of beliefs about the price of wine face the same problem. But it is at least imaginable that a seemingly high price may have the opposite effect — for instance, the critic in question may judge the wine to be not very good and, hence, to be heavily overpriced, perhaps further strengthening his negative attitude towards the wine. Besides, it is also not clear how, say, well-informed art-historians would respond to knowledge about the price of paintings when aiming to carefully determine the aesthetic worth of the latter.

Then, that our assessments of Impressionist paintings tend to be more positive if we are more familiar with them should not be surprising. After all, familiarity is

---

<sup>9</sup>Interestingly, contemporary artists rarely have the image of being potentially successful parents, even assuming that they are rich and that what matters is solely the number of healthy offspring they and the following generations are likely to produce. Several explanations suggest themselves, such as changes towards an individualistic way of living, or the felt need to concentrate all time and energy on the art itself.

<sup>10</sup>I am largely following the description of these studies in Kieran (Kieran).

a condition on proper aesthetic evaluation and, in particular, on the recognition of aesthetic worth. It often takes time to be able to see the real value of an artwork. And this is not less true of genres or kinds of artworks which people are generally more exposed to — say, for reasons of fashion, or due to the fact that the art concerned is (presumably wrongly) now perceived as having lost its revolutionary or provocative status. It may be pointed out that the subjects concerned (i.e., students listening to introductory lectures in psychology, with the paintings serving as backgrounds for the presented slides) did not look at the paintings — and did not familiarise themselves with them — with the aim to appreciate them as artworks. Hence, their familiarity with the paintings may be of a rather different kind than the one presupposed by proper aesthetic assessment. But then, their resulting preferences should count as defective from an aesthetic point of view — either because they are not aesthetic at all due to a lack of claim to objectivity, or because they fail to live up to that claim inherent in aesthetic evaluation. The same seems true of cases in which beliefs about the financial value of objects influence our aesthetic assessments of them — the latter should minimally count as defective. This is actually one reason why, even if it is indeed the case that price or familiarity influence our preferences in a biased manner, this does not undermine accounts of aesthetic value which stress the objectivity and rationality of aesthetic criticism.

Another reason is that some of the studies test our emotional preferences, rather than our rational assessments of objects. Pleasure or preference — that is, what we like — is surely open to irrational factors. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Dorsch (2007)), this is precisely why we should be rather wary when relying on our emotional feelings for the evaluation of objects.<sup>11</sup> There is no problem in ascribing values on the basis of emotions (or similar states, such as desires) — as long as we clearly acknowledge that the ascribed values are subjective and do not necessarily reflect how the objects should be assessed from a more objective point of view. If we are instead concerned with the discovery of the objective value of an object, emotions are not our best guides and, in fact, may often mislead us. They may be very successful in drawing our attention to the positive or negative values of objects, as well as to their other features which help to realise those values. But due to their openness to irrational factors, we need to rely on reason to check their reliability.

Of course, we are very good at coming up with invented rationalisations of our aesthetic judgements. And whether we recognise certain features of an artwork as a reason to ascribe to them a certain aesthetic value may also be open to influence from aesthetically irrelevant factors, such as familiarity or price. But we can, at least to a considerable extent, overcome these obstacles, say, by listening to the assessments

---

<sup>11</sup>Compare also Goldie (2004)'s view that emotions do not ground evaluations, but instead are themselves partly grounded by reasons for evaluation.

and justifications of others. We should perhaps not simply take over their opinions. But we should at least use them to question the epistemic standing of our own views and to reconsider our reasons for endorsing the latter. Empirical studies — like the one's mentioned — may in fact play a similar role to such testimony. While they cannot tell us what aesthetic value is or how we should ascribe it to particular objects, they may help us to recognise that our aesthetic judgements are easily influenced by factors that ideally should have had no bearing. In other words, empirical evidence may show us that certain of our aesthetic evaluations are not of good aesthetic standing (or even not aesthetic in the first place). But it cannot weaken those standards, or replace them with new ones.

It might be suggested that such investigations actually show that we are never really able to live up to this ideal and form proper aesthetic judgements. But this form of scepticism seems to be too strong. First, the studies are typically concerned with situations in which the subjects are ignorant about some very important facts about the objects concerned. That people get misled when assessing a white wine which they take to be red does not show that they get misled in the same way when assessing a red wine which they take to be red. In the first case, they go wrong precisely because they miscategorise the object concerned. But they do so in good faith and are not to be blamed for their mistake. After all, the perceptual evidence is striking, and the experimentators seem to be trustworthy to them. Hence, in the second case in which they categorise the wine correctly, it is not to be expected that their categorisation will give rise to any error in their aesthetic appreciation. And second, criticism does not differ in this respect from physics, say. Truth in the sciences (with the possible exception of mathematics) is typically only approximate (cf. Oddie (199x)). It may be easy to falsify a theory, but perhaps impossible to verify it. So we should not expect criticism to fare better in this respect, especially since aesthetic truths seem to be more elusive than scientific ones — partly because they are so closely linked to our first-personal perspective onto the world (as illustrated, for instance, by the principle of acquaintance). What the empirical studies at best illustrate is that it is difficult and time-consuming to come to a proper aesthetic assessment of a particular object.

## 4 Conclusion

The preceding considerations were meant to show that — and also begin to explain why — the relevance of the results of empirical studies of various kinds for both the criticism of artworks and the philosophy of aesthetic value is limited. Concerning criticism, the normativity of aesthetic evaluations has the consequence that scientific

investigations can at best help us to notice features of artworks, which we can then independently recognise as aesthetically relevant; while the concreteness of aesthetic evaluations has the consequence that empirical studies either miss their particular target completely, or shed light on it only in a very specific way, without the possibility for meaningful generalisations. Moreover, making sense of the aesthetic worth of objects in terms of their other features requires non-empirical rational considerations. Concerning philosophy, on the other hand, empirical findings may perhaps bring us to reconsider our accounts of aesthetic value and its application to particular artworks. But neither considerations about the evolution of artistic practices, nor facts about our emotional and evaluative responses to artworks require us to develop more empiricist views on what aesthetic value is and how we should go about ascribing it. Again, the rationality of aesthetic evaluations and the concreteness of our motivations for engaging with art are partly responsible for this facts: neither can be easily tested or illuminated by empirical means.

Returning to the issue of aesthetic criticism, the same limitations do not pertain to our first-hand and first-personal experiences of artworks, despite their empirical character. They concern particular objects and provide us with reasons; and they enable us to make sense of the aesthetic value of objects. This appears to suggest that there is a fundamental divide among our empirical ways of accessing artworks. One hypothesis is that any more indirect or third-personal evidence becomes relevant for the aesthetic evaluation of specific works only if it is integrated with our more basic aesthetic experiences of them — for instance, when art-historical facts concern the particular object in question, or psychological evidence is focussed on our specific response. That is, the third-personally gained empirical results may supplement our aesthetic experiences in that they point us to features which make it intelligible why the objects concern possess their aesthetic values. By contrast, other, more general kinds of third-personal findings may just bring us to question our considered views about the values of objects or the nature of those values. The so-called ‘test of time’ may perhaps serve as an illustration of this condition on the relevance of empirical evidence. Part of the explanation of why objects survive this test is that people (whether they are experienced critics or ordinary lay people) continue over the centuries and cultures to care about their preservation for aesthetic reasons (and not merely for financial or other reasons). So the survival of a given artwork provides us with empirical evidence — though, it seems, not (as Hume may have hoped) about its aesthetic value, but instead about the more general quality of our own evaluation of it. Having previously failed to appreciate Homer’s *Ulysses*, realising what it means for it to have survived the centuries may still bring us to reconsider its aesthetic quality and perhaps to recognise its proper worth.

## References

- Allen, K. (2010). Locating the unique hues. *Estetica* 43(1).
- Brochet, F. (2001). Tasting: Chemical object representation in the field of consciousness. Prix Coup de Coeur, Academie Amarin.
- Budd, M. (2003). The acquaintance principle. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43(4), 386–392.
- Byrne, A. and D. R. Hilbert (2003). Color realism and color science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 26, 3–21.
- Currie, G. (2005). *Arts and Minds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cutting, J. E. (2006). The mere exposure effect and aesthetic preference. In P. Locher (Ed.), *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity and the Psychology of Art*, New York, pp. 33–46. Baywood.
- Dorsch, F. (2007). Sentimentalism and the intersubjectivity of aesthetic evaluations. *dialectica* 61(3), 417–46.
- Dorsch, F. (2010a). Colour resemblance and colour realism. *Rivista di Estetica* 43(1), 85–108.
- Dorsch, F. (2010b). The higher-level recognition of aesthetic qualities.
- Dutton, D. (2003). Aesthetics and evolutionary psychology. In J. Levinson (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldie, P. (2004). Emotion, reason and virtue. In P. Cruse and D. Evans (Eds.), *Emotion, Evolution and Rationality*, Oxford, pp. 249–268. Oxford University Press.
- Hopkins, R. (2001). Kant, quasi-realism and the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. *European Journal of Philosophy* 9, 166–189.
- Jackson, F., P. Pettit, and M. Smith. Ethical particularism and patterns.
- Kieran, M. The fragility of aesthetic knowledge: Aesthetic psychology and appreciative virtues.
- Miller, G. F. (2000). *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*. New York: Doubleday.
- Oddie, G. (199x). *Approximate Truth*.

Plassmann, H., J. O’Doherty, B. Shiv, and A. Rangel (2008). Marketing actions can modulate neural representations of experienced pleasantness. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105, 1050–54.

Sibley, F. (2001). *Approach To Aesthetics: Collected Papers On Philosophical Aesthetics*.

Thomasson, A. L. (1999). *Fiction and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. *Truth and Truthfulness*.

Zahavi, A. and A. Zahavi (1997). *The Handicap Principle: A Missing Piece of Darwin’s Puzzle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.