

SOME REMARKS ON DESCRIPTIVE AND NEGATIVE AESTHETIC CONCEPTS: A CRITICAL NOTE

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This critical note on Tomáš Kulka's 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified' revisits Kulka's treatment of what he calls the main thesis of Frank Sibley's famous essay 'Aesthetic Concepts' (1959). According to this thesis, 'There are no non-aesthetic features which serve as conditions for applying aesthetic terms', and 'aesthetic or taste concepts are not in this respect condition-governed'. Kulka argues that this thesis fails to apply to descriptive concepts and some negative aesthetic concepts. In his view there exist concepts that are both aesthetic and condition-governed. We argue against Kulka, seeking to show that he fails to appreciate Sibley's central thesis.

In a recent article¹ Tomáš Kulka made several important remarks on the way we describe and assess works of art. As a starting point for his own account he chose Frank Sibley's famous essay, 'Aesthetic Concepts'.² According to Kulka, its central thesis calls for an amendment. In a nutshell, it says that our talk about aesthetic features of things is not governed by rules. In Sibley's own words: 'There are no non-aesthetic features which serve as conditions for applying aesthetic terms. Aesthetic or taste concepts are not in this respect condition-governed at all.'³ Or elsewhere: 'Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms as fully as we please but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced.'⁴

'The problem with Sibley's thesis is its scope,' Kulka points out.⁵ As he sees it, there are respects, in which aesthetic concepts *are* governed by rules and his ambition in the article is, among other things, to 'demonstrate that although [Sibley's thesis] is valid for positive aesthetic judgements it does not hold for descriptive aesthetic concepts just as it does not apply to negative evaluative aesthetic concepts, which

¹ Tomáš Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2009): 3–28.

² Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review* 67 (1959): 421–50.

³ *Ibid.*, 424. In his article, Sibley discusses several types of condition governance at length to specify in greater detail what he means by the notion of being condition-governed. He pays attention to words, which are applied in accordance with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions or to the so-called 'defeasible' concepts. Sibley also points out that he will 'speak loosely of an "aesthetic term", even when, because the word sometimes has other uses, it would be more correct to speak of its *use* as an aesthetic term'. *Ibid.*, 421. In the same manner, we will be speaking of 'aesthetic usage of language', 'aesthetic concepts', and 'aesthetic terms' interchangeably.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁵ Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified', 19.

are governed by rules'.⁶ We will try to show that both amendments are disputable and inconsistent with what Sibley meant by his 'central thesis'.

According to Kulka,

Some aesthetic terms, like 'beautiful', 'elegant', 'graceful', 'well balanced', 'ugly', 'incoherent', 'disorganized', and 'kitschy', are *normative*; they are typically used as evaluative expressions, which imply praise or disapproval. Others, like 'tragic', 'dramatic', 'grotesque', 'epic', 'lyric', 'Gothic', 'Baroque', and 'Cubist', are *descriptive*; they do not imply any value judgement but they tell us something about the kind of work and its global structure.⁷

For Kulka, these descriptive concepts also belong to the family of aesthetic concepts. And since, for example, the mere identification of an artistic style (such as 'Gothic') is governed by rules (in this case, having pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and so forth), it follows that there are aesthetic concepts that are governed by rules. With regard to negative aesthetic concepts, Kulka asks us to consider a two-hour performance of a stage play that consists solely of repeating what happened during its first three minutes. Aware of this non-aesthetic characteristic, 'we can be reasonably sure that the play is boring'.⁸ Hence, Kulka argues, negative aesthetic concepts can indeed be governed by rules.

Since Sibley's essay serves Kulka as a reference text, let us recall what Sibley himself understood by the 'aesthetic' usage of words and phrases. He speaks about taste and qualifies aesthetic words or expressions so that 'taste or perceptiveness is required to apply [them]'.⁹ The truth is that he has repeatedly denied that he had been intending to define 'the aesthetic' precisely. Providing examples of expressions and judgements, he indicated that the initial distinction was crucial for him: 'I make this broad distinction by means of *examples* of judgments, qualities, and expressions. There is, it seems to me, no need to defend this distinction. Once examples have been given to illustrate it, I believe almost anyone could continue to place further examples [...] in one category or the other'.¹⁰ But Sibley does not leave this pre-theoretical intuition as is and he tries to account for it. He clearly formulates one of the main results of his endeavour in the last paragraph of the first part of 'Aesthetic Concepts': 'It is a characteristic and essential feature of judgments which employ an aesthetic term that they cannot be made by appealing [...] to non-aesthetic conditions. [...] It is part of what "taste" means'.¹¹ A more direct formulation occurs in his 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic': 'To suppose

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 19–20.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 421.

¹⁰ Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.

¹¹ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 436–37.

indeed that one can make aesthetic judgements without aesthetic perception, say, by following rules of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment.¹² From these statements it clearly follows that Sibley considered the absence of rule governance a necessary condition of the aesthetic usage of language. And he dubbed this ability 'taste'.

Kulka seems to have misunderstood what 'Sibley's central thesis' actually says, that is, what Sibley himself wanted to say, about aesthetic concepts and rules. According to our reading of Kulka's article, the author has simply disconnected what he calls 'Sibley's central thesis' from the notion of taste. That becomes apparent, for example, in the following remark:

One can argue, and with some plausibility, that one need not employ the faculty of taste in order to tell that something is Gothic, dramatic, or tragic, that these sortal concepts (denoting styles, genres, or other typological categories) are not *taste concepts*. The problem is that this does not accord well with the established practice. Most aestheticians have the tendency to use the term 'aesthetic concepts' in a much wider sense and to consider the normative aesthetic judgements their subset, which is often called 'verdicts'. We may note that apart from taste Sibley also lists perceptiveness and the ability of aesthetic discrimination as criteria of being aesthetic.¹³

Here Kulka observes that the majority of recent aestheticians (of whom he names only Nelson Goodman) see the aesthetic discourse much more inclusively than Sibley did. And he seems to approve of their opinion. But, to approve the notion that aesthetic concepts that are not governed by rules form only a sub-category of all aesthetic concepts, we have to know what brings together both these types of concepts under one category of the aesthetic. We have to ask what normative aesthetic concepts have in common with merely descriptive ones. Lacking that account, Kulka's proposal remains empty.

Let us take a closer look at one of the examples of aesthetic descriptive concepts that Kulka mentions, the term 'tragic':

Consider, for example, an accurate description of the plot of Clarence Brown's film version of *Anna Karenina* (1935), which would also specify some scene sequences, close-ups, and dramatic effects, without mentioning any aesthetic properties. Would not such a description be sufficient for reaching the conclusion that the film is dynamic, dramatic, moving, and tragic?¹⁴

Our previous line of argument leads straightforwardly to a question: What makes the term 'tragic' aesthetic? Consider a situation suggested by Derek Matravers while discussing the consequences of Sibley's essay:

¹² Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', 34.

¹³ Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified', 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

Standing in Durham Cathedral I say 'It's vast.' 'Yes,' says my interlocutor, 'the nave is over 200 feet long.' Something here is not being communicated; I did not mean just to say that the thing was big, but to draw my colleague's attention to the dispositional property of the size to cause a feeling of insignificance, or of being overwhelmed. Does this mean 'vast' is ambiguous? No; just that, on this occasion, my colleague is not grasping everything that I mean.¹⁵

What this shows is that we are confronted with more relevant meanings of the term 'vast' in this situation, but only one of them is aesthetic. We propose an analogy: Sitting in a movie theatre, watching a new adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, we say 'It's tragic.' 'Of course,' says our interlocutor, 'it is not a comedy; it is a classic of the genre.' But we did not mean to draw our colleague's attention to features of the film, which classify it as a tragedy. We wanted to stress what a bad work of cinema this movie was. Again, as with the term 'vast' as applied to Durham Cathedral, there are two relevant meanings of 'tragic' involved in this communication. Are we now ready to accept, as Kulka suggests, that both of these are aesthetic uses of the term 'tragic'? To answer this question, we need to know what qualifies each of them as such. Notice that the absence of rule-governance cannot do the job for Kulka.

The term 'tragic' in its evaluative meaning, as used above, is a negative aesthetic concept. This brings us to the second part of Kulka's proposal: Sibley's thesis does not apply to negative evaluative aesthetic concepts. Why can only positive evaluative aesthetic terms be characterized as not being governed by rules? There has to be a reason for this split. But Kulka says nothing more about this. Nevertheless, what is interesting is that this view fails to comport not only with Sibley's account of the aesthetic, but also with Kulka's own attitude. At one point in his essay, Sibley remarks:

Examples undoubtedly play a crucial role in giving us a grasp of [the aesthetic] concepts; but we do not and cannot derive from these examples conditions and principles, however complex, which will guide us consistently and intelligibly in applying the terms to new cases. When, with a clear case of something which is in fact graceful or balanced or tightly-knit but which I have not seen, someone tells me why it is, what features make it so, it is always possible for me to wonder whether, in spite of these features, it really is graceful, balanced, and so on.¹⁶

Later in his article, Sibley backs these considerations concerning the lack of general aesthetic principles, by explaining that they are individual and specific features of things we are concerned with when talking about things in an

¹⁵ Derek Matravers, 'Aesthetic Concepts and Aesthetic Experiences', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 274.

¹⁶ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 432.

aesthetic way, and proposes that ‘the features which make something delicate or graceful, and so on, are combined in a peculiar and unique way; that the aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colors and shapes so that even the slight change might make all the difference.’¹⁷

In the same spirit, Kulka writes: ‘Aesthetic properties such as “being well balanced” are thus *indexical* in the sense that they are specific to each individual work and differ from instance to instance: the harmonization of (non-aesthetic) features and elements in Bellini’s painting is quite different from that in Jawlensky’s portrait, which again differ from those of the well-balanced composition of Braque’s still life.’¹⁸ If all aesthetic properties are radically unique, then, accordingly, our pointing out these features cannot be governed by any general rules. This is just another way of putting Sibley’s central thesis as we read it. Why should there be any difference between a statement connoting our positive appraisal and a statement presenting a negative one? Both of them are alike in pointing out equally unique aesthetic properties. The only difference is in their distinct positions on the scale between aesthetically good and bad. In other words, when presenting a negative evaluative aesthetic judgement we just want to state that features of a given work have been combined so that the result has such and such aesthetic qualities which we evaluate negatively. The negative evaluative aesthetic judgement cannot therefore be condition governed any more than the positive one.

Unless Kulka presents a clear criterion of the aesthetic, which would interconnect all the types of the judgements he is discussing under this heading (that is, descriptive and negative evaluative concepts governed by rules, on the one hand, and positive aesthetic evaluative concepts not governed by rules, on the other), we doubt that his use of this notion is justified.

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¹⁷ Ibid., 435.

¹⁸ Kulka, ‘Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified’, 18.

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