



ON THE ASYMMETRY BETWEEN POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS: A RESPONSE TO DADEJÍK AND KUBALÍK

TOMÁŠ KULKA

In an earlier article published in this journal, I was concerned with the question of whether aesthetic value judgements about works of art can be justified with reference to their non-aesthetic features.¹ In this context, I thus couldn't but draw on Frank Sibley's well-known thesis asserting that 'there are no non-aesthetic features which serve in *any* circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms', because 'aesthetic or taste concepts are not in this respect condition governed at all'.² Now, if this thesis is true, then aesthetic judgements cannot be justified, at least not with reference to the work's non-aesthetic features, because justification or explanation presupposes a generalization (rules or conditions) and this is just what Sibley's thesis precludes.³ Naturally, the thesis was met with adverse reactions from philosophers who were committed to theories of art evaluation with objectivist leanings. Among them, I have chosen Eddy Zemach as the most vehement critic of Sibley's thesis because he marshalled most arguments to show that Sibley is wrong. I have argued that although most of Zemach's criticism misses the point, the scope of Sibley's thesis has to be restricted to positive aesthetic judgements, if counter-examples are to be avoided. In other words, although I believe that 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 are governed by conditions or rules.⁴ In their 'Critical Note', which was published in the last issue of this journal, Ondřej Dadejík and Štěpán Kubalík argue that I am wrong on both counts.⁵

This article was written within the programme for the Development of Fields of Study at Charles University, No. P13, Rationality in Human Science, sub-programme: Knowledge and Normativity.

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): 424.

³ The rule or the conditional that is needed for justification or explanation of an aesthetic judgement would have the following form: Any objet that has the non-aesthetic properties N_1, \dots, N_n will have the aesthetic property A. Or, in logician's shorthand: (x) $[(N_1x \& \dots \& N_nx) \rightarrow Ax]$

⁴ Following Sibley, Zemach, Dadejík, and Kubalík, I shall use 'conditions' and 'rules' interchangeably.

⁵ Ondřej Dadejík and Štěpán Kubalík, 'Some Remarks on Descriptive and Negative Aesthetic Concepts: A Critical Note', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2013): 206–11.



I shall follow Dadejík and Kubalík in dealing with each of the two issues separately, yet before doing so, I would like to pause at their declaration of intent at the very outset of their article, since it is already here that something goes astray. They write: 'We will try to show that both amendments are disputable and inconsistent with what Sibley meant by his "central thesis"'.⁶ I find the charge of inconsistency rather odd. Of course my conclusions are inconsistent with Sibley's thesis (on any reasonable interpretation of it).⁷ How could it possibly be otherwise, given the fact I criticize it and back up my criticism with counter-examples? Unfortunately, this strange complaint cannot be ignored as an isolated blunder. For not only does it reappear,⁸ but it also seems to form the backbone of most of Dadejík's and Kubalík's argumentation, which nearly always boils down to the claim that I am wrong because Sibley has written that aesthetic concepts are not governed by conditions. As one reads on, it becomes apparent that my critics blame me for not accepting that the term 'aesthetic concepts' just means 'concepts that are not governed by conditions', which they (mistakenly) take as Sibley's criterion for distinguishing between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts and for them is an indubitable article of faith.

I. DESCRIPTIVE AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

As to the question of descriptive aesthetic concepts, I have sided with Eddy Zemach that it is possible to state non-aesthetic conditions for concepts like 'dynamic', 'dramatic', 'moving', or 'tragic', which appear on Sibley's list of typical examples of aesthetic concepts. I gave an example of a non-aesthetic description of Clarence Brown's film version of *Anna Karenina*, which was, in my opinion, sufficient to warrant 'the conclusion that the film is dynamic, dramatic, moving, and tragic'.⁹ My critics picked the term 'tragic', and argued that in this case 'tragic' was not used in the aesthetic sense, because it just denoted the genre of tragedy (which for them is not an aesthetic concept), and that in its aesthetic use it would have to be 'a negative aesthetic concept' which expresses 'what a bad work of cinema this movie was'.¹⁰ Leaving aside the question of the plausibility of this claim, or the question of how they would account for 'dynamic', 'dramatic', and 'moving', and whether Sibley really put 'tragic' on his list because he considered

⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁷ This includes also Dadejík and Kubalík's own interpretation, even though I don't think it is reasonable.

⁸ For example, my critics claim that 'Sibley's thesis does not apply to negative evaluative aesthetic judgements' is rejected because 'this view fails to comport with [...] Sibley's account of the aesthetic'. Ibid., 209.

⁹ Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements', 20; quoted by Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 209.

¹⁰ Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 209.



it an example of a negative aesthetic verdict, let me point out that in Dadejík and Kubalík's 'Critical Note' one can discern two distinct claims: (1) that my conclusion that descriptive aesthetic concepts are governed by rules *happens to be* wrong, because on closer analysis it turns out that their use is not aesthetic, and (2) that it *must be* wrong since aesthetic concepts cannot possibly be governed by rules because of the meaning of the term 'aesthetic concepts'.

Concerning the first claim, I have anticipated this kind of objection. That is why at the very end of my argument leading to the conclusion that 'Zemach is right and Sibley is wrong as far as descriptive aesthetic terms are concerned',¹¹ I added the following proviso: 'One could forestall this conclusion by insisting that the aesthetic concepts I have termed "descriptive" are not really aesthetic, that aesthetic concepts require normative import in order to qualify as aesthetic.'¹² I am not going to deliberate here on how reasonable or unreasonable such a position could be, since, as I have indicated, I do not consider it important.¹³ As I wrote in the very last sentence on the problem of descriptive aesthetic concepts: 'Be that as it may, my argument [...] does not depend on taking a position on this matter.'¹⁴

I thus could, theoretically speaking, concede this point to my critics. But I am not going to do this, because their ultimate reason for rejecting the claim that aesthetic descriptive concepts could be governed by rules is based on their second claim, that is, on their stipulation that the term 'aesthetic concepts' just *means* 'concepts that are not governed by rules'. Hence, it follows that the expression 'aesthetic concepts that are not governed by rules' would be a *contradictio in adjecto*, which is a conclusion I cannot accept. This also raises the question of how Dadejík and Kubalík can legislate in the dispute (amongst Sibley, Zemach, and myself) about whether aesthetic concepts are or are not (as a matter of fact) governed by rules. For with Dadejík and Kubalík you cannot win. Either aesthetic concepts are not (as a matter of fact) governed by rules, or they cannot possibly be so governed (because the absence of such rules is a criterion for identifying aesthetic concepts). Moreover, they want to saddle Sibley with just this interpretation of his thesis,¹⁵ even though Sibley explicitly rejects it.¹⁶ Yet Dadejík and Kubalík

¹¹ Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements', 20.

¹² Ibid., n29.

¹³ As the title of my article 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified' suggests, I was chiefly concerned with the problem of justification of aesthetic *value* judgements, not with the question of whether all Sibley's examples of aesthetic concepts are really aesthetic.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ Dadejík and Kubalík write: 'Sibley considered the absence of rule governance a necessary condition of the aesthetic use of language.' 'Some Remarks', 208.

¹⁶ Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 152–53; I shall quote Sibley on this below.



insist that this is what Sibley really 'meant by his central thesis', that this is what his 'central thesis actually says', 'what Sibley himself wanted to say about aesthetic concepts and rules',¹⁷ and it is this interpretation, which I have, as they say, misunderstood and failed to appreciate.¹⁸ They are right that I have not appreciated it, and the reason is that under such an interpretation Sibley's highly interesting, important, and provocative thesis¹⁹ that aesthetic concepts are not governed by conditions would turn into a tautology – namely, the claim that concepts not governed by conditions are not governed by conditions. This has a solid ring of truth, but philosophically it is hardly electrifying.

One should also note that if Dadejík and Kubalík's interpretation of Sibley's thesis that 'aesthetic concepts' just means 'concepts not governed by conditions' were correct, then there should be no room for exceptions. Yet Sibley readily admits exceptions.²⁰ Unlike his two interpreters, he is not at all categorical about aesthetic judgements not being governed by rules, for he says that there are 'occasions when aesthetic words can be applied by rules'.²¹

Let me also point out that Dadejík and Kubalík have themselves noted that 'Sibley has repeatedly denied that he had been intending to define the "the aesthetic"'.²² They even quote him on this point: 'I make this broad distinction [between aesthetic and non-aesthetic] by means of *examples* of judgments, qualities or 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.'²³ Dadejík and Kubalík claim, however, that this is just Sibley's starting point, and that 'Sibley does not leave this pre-theoretical intuition as is and tries to account for it',²⁴ presumably

¹⁷ Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 207, 208.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 206, 208.

¹⁹ It is provocative in the sense that if, according to Sibley, aesthetic properties depend on the non-aesthetic ones, then why should describing these non-aesthetic properties be irrelevant for a correct application of aesthetic concepts?

²⁰ For example, Sibley writes: 'I cannot in the compass of this paper discuss the other types of apparent exceptions to my thesis. Cases where a man *lacking* in sensitivity might learn and follow the rule [...] ought to be distinguished from cases where someone who *possesses* sensitivity might know, from a nonaesthetic description, that an aesthetic term applies. I have stated my thesis as though this later kind never occurs because I had my eye on the logical features of *typical* aesthetic judgements and have preferred to over- rather than understate my views.' Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 433.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 433. Sibley seems to have softened his position even further, when at the end of his later article, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', he concludes that the 'kind of "justification" of aesthetic judgements by means of generalizations could not [...] be supplied for *all* such judgements' (p. 158, emphasis in the original).

²² Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 206.

²³ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 432, quoted in Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 207.

²⁴ Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 207.



by further examination and analysis of the distinction that somehow eventuates into a criteria for distinguishing aesthetic concepts with the final conclusion that 'aesthetic concepts' mean 'concepts that are not governed by rules'. Leaving aside the difficult question of how one could establish such a conclusion, let me note that Sibley's rejection of defining aesthetic concepts or even characterizing them by the absence of rules relating the two kinds of concepts could hardly be only his starting point in 'Aesthetic Concepts', since this rejection (including the above passage quoted by Dadejík and Kubalík) comes from his later article 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic'.²⁵

Before quoting Sibley on all this, let me point out that, if one wants to investigate the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts (and this is what Sibley is about), one just cannot define or even characterize one of these in terms of the others or by any relationship between the two kinds of concepts. The distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic has to be either taken as given or it has to be established independently of the relationship between them, for otherwise such an investigation wouldn't make sense. This is just a plain common sense. One just cannot identify aesthetic concepts as concepts not governed by conditions that can be stated in non-aesthetic terms, because then the whole project would be pointless. Sibley was naturally well aware of all this. I believe that he wrote the following passage just to forestall interpretations of his thesis such as the one Dadejík and Kubalík have presented. This is what he says:

It should be noticed also that to discuss the relationship between my two sorts of concepts, the two sorts must be identified *independently* of such relationship. One could not distinguish aesthetic concepts from others by the fact that they lack a certain relationship to those others. I have taken the two types to be adequately indicated by my original examples and by what was said briefly about sensitivity or taste. I have not examined or analysed the distinction further, and since the arguments of this paper take it as given, they cannot be regarded as helping to explain the difference or to say what aesthetic sensitivity consists in.²⁶

It thus seems that Dadejík and Kubalík's interpretation of Sibley's thesis betrays a misconception of what Sibley's renowned essay is about.

II. NEGATIVE AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

As to Dadejík's and Kubalík's second disagreement, let me point out that I haven't simply stated that Sibley's thesis does not apply to negative aesthetic judgements;

²⁵ 'Aesthetic Concepts' was published in 1959, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic' in 1965.

²⁶ Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', 152–53.



I have offered three examples of negative aesthetic evaluative concepts that are governed by conditions. One would thus expect that the critics of this claim would try to show what is wrong with these examples. Dadejík and Kubalík have not done this; instead they have just repeated that negative aesthetic concepts cannot be governed by rules, because Sibley had (presumably) said that no aesthetic judgements can be governed by rules.

Let me restate these examples. I have proposed to consider 'fascinating' and 'boring' as applied to theatre plays, and 'beautiful' and 'ugly' as applied to human faces. While agreeing with Sibley that we are unable to state non-aesthetic conditions for the correct application of 'fascinating' or 'beautiful', I gave examples of how we can do so for 'boring' and 'ugly'. If we were told, for instance, that what happens on the stage during the first three minutes is repeated without any change during the two hours long performance, we can be reasonably sure that the play is boring.²⁷ And if we are told that some woman's nose is more than six inches long, that her left eye is grey and the right one pink, that her pale cheeks are sprinkled with boils, and her twisted smile reveals three brown teeth, we may conclude that she is ugly. My third example was the concept of 'kitsch' (which can be contrasted with 'exquisite work of art'), the correct application of which, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁸ conforms to the three conditions that can be stated in non-aesthetic terms as follows: '1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions; 2. The objects or themes of kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable; and 3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.'²⁹

I suspect the reason why Dadejík and Kubalík have not tried to discredit these examples is that one of them happens to be almost identical with Sibley's own counter-example to the unrestricted validity of his thesis. Here it is: 'Perhaps a description like "One eye red and rheumy, the other missing, a wart-covered nose, a twisted mouth, a greenish pallor" may justify in a strong sense ("must be", "cannot but be") the judgments "ugly" or "hideous".'³⁰ Sibley is actually closer to my position than Dadejík and Kubalík would allow him to be. For he also writes that 'with certain aesthetic terms, especially negative ones, there may perhaps be some rare genuine exceptions when a description enables us to visualize very

²⁷ In other words, any play that will satisfy the above-mentioned non-aesthetic conditions will be boring.

²⁸ Tomas Kulka, 'Kitsch', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28 (1988): 18–27, and *Kitsch and Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

²⁹ Kulka, 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements', 21 (quoted from *Kitsch and Art*, 37–8). Each of the three conditions are considered necessary, jointly they are taken as sufficient.

³⁰ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 433n6.

fully, and when what is described belongs to a certain restricted class of things, say human faces or animal forms.'

It thus seems that here the only difference between Sibley's position and mine is that he claims that such examples are rare and inconsequential while I believe they are frequent and important. While according to Sibley 'such cases are marginal, form a very small minority, and are uncharacteristic or atypical of aesthetic judgments in general',³¹ I think that negative aesthetic judgements are just as frequent (both in art criticism and outside the realm of the arts) as the positive ones, and that 'ugly' is just as a typical example of an aesthetic concept as 'beautiful' is. I also do not suppose that such negative aesthetic judgements depend on the full visualization of the object. On the basis of Sibley's description of a face or my sketch of a theatre play, we know only that the face is ugly and the play boring irrespective of how fully we can visualize them. Concerning the boring play, I don't have to visualize anything, and although I can't help visualizing something regarding the ugly face, my conclusion need not be based on any specific mental image. The example of kitsch and a boring theatre play also demonstrates that such judgements are not confined to human faces or animal forms, and the example of kitsch alone shows that it does not apply to a 'restricted class of things', since 'kitsch' may denote a larger class of objects than the term 'exquisite work of art'.

In any case, I take it that it has been demonstrated that at least some negative aesthetic judgements can be justified, that is, that they are governed by conditions. The question is, how to account for this fact? Why can we formulate non-aesthetic specifications that can serve as sufficient conditions for a correct application of negative aesthetic concepts but not for the positive ones? Why should there be an asymmetry between positive and negative value judgements with respect to their justification? Or, as Dadejík and Kubalík put 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.'³² Dadejík and Kubalík also point out that I am fully committed to the view that *all* aesthetic properties are unique, that is, that the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene differ from work to work. Hence, if the positive aesthetic features like beautiful, fascinating, or exquisite are unique, I should acknowledge that the contrasting aesthetic properties like ugly, boring, or kitsch should also be unique.³³ And

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dadejík and Kubalík, 'Some Remarks', 210.

³³ This may not apply to all manifestations of kitsch because some are mass-produced.

indeed I do. Just as every beautiful face differs from every other beautiful face (with the exception of identical twins), every ugly face differs from all the other ugly faces. Dadejík and Kubalík are thus quite right that I should explain how this asymmetry is possible.³⁴

Let us have a look at a passage from Sibley, which my critics quote in order to back up their claim that ‘the negative evaluative aesthetic judgements cannot [...] be condition governed any more than the positive ones,’³⁵ because it can actually serve as a starting point for explaining why only negative judgements can be condition governed: ‘The features which make something delicate or graceful, and so on, are combined in a particular 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.’³⁶ One should first note that ‘delicate’ and ‘graceful’ are positive aesthetic evaluative terms and that what Sibley says about slight changes making all the difference makes sense. Would it, however, be equally true of contrasting terms such as ‘coarse,’ ‘vulgar,’ or ‘tasteless’? I think we would have a hard time finding examples of how a slight alteration in a tasteless painting would make all the difference, how it could make it graceful. I have already shown how a very slight change in a graceful work (I have chosen *Mona Lisa*) can make all the difference, how it might lose its grace.³⁷ If, on the other hand, we would take a painting that is a hopeless mess, a slight change would not make it into a respectable work of art. The same applies to the ugly face and boring play. If an ugly face conforms to Sibley’s specifications, then not only a slight change but even substantial ones would not alter the fact that it is ugly. Likewise, irrespective of any changes in what happens on the stage during the three minutes that keep repeating, the play will remain boring.

These examples show that the uniqueness of aesthetic features is not enough for ruling out rules.³⁸ In other words, from the fact that all aesthetic properties of works of art or objects of aesthetic evaluation (like human faces) are unique, it does not follow that all aesthetic judgements are not governed by rules. The reason is that the true claim that, for example, every ugly face is unique (its ugliness differs from all other ugly faces) is perfectly compatible with another true claim that all

³⁴ They write: ‘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.’ Dadejík and Kubalík, ‘Some Remarks’, 209.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Kulka, ‘Why Aesthetic Value Judgements’, 15–16.

³⁸ I have to admit that I was not quite clear about this and that it was only thanks to the challenge of Dadejík and Kubalík’s ‘Some Remarks’ that that I have fully realized this fact.

human faces that satisfy the above-stated non-aesthetic conditions will be ugly (even though each will differ from every other ugly face that satisfies the same conditions). Thus although every face, theatre play, or painting is unique, one can state, as we have seen, sufficient non-aesthetic conditions for ugly faces, boring plays, or kitsch paintings,³⁹ even though Sibley's thesis holds for beautiful faces, fascinating plays, or exquisite works of art.

Sibley's thesis applies to aesthetic success but not to aesthetic or artistic failures. For Sibley is right that the merits of exquisite works of art may result from the fact that their non-aesthetic properties 'are combined in a particular and unique way; that the aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colors and shapes';⁴⁰ but, as we have seen, this is not true of artistic failures or aesthetic misfits, where many features may be exchanged with others, without affecting their 'badness'.

Tomáš Kulka
Department of Aesthetics,
Faculty of Arts, Charles University,
Celetná 20, 116 42 Prague 1, Czech Republic
kulkat@cuni.cz

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dadejík, Ondřej, and Štěpán Kubalík. 'Some Remarks on Descriptive and Negative Aesthetic Concepts: A Critical Note.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 50 (2013): 206–11.
- Kulka, Tomas. 'Kitsch.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28 (1988): 18–27.
- . *Kitsch and Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Kulka, Tomáš. 'Why Aesthetic Value Judgements Cannot Be Justified.' *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetic* 46 (2009): 3–28.
- Sibley, Frank. 'Aesthetic Concepts.' *Philosophical Review* 67 (1959): 421–50.
- . 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic.' *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 135–59.

³⁹ These conditions are not, of course, necessary since faces and plays might be ugly or boring in many other ways than were specified here. Sibley was concerned with sufficient conditions because these are the ones needed for explanation or justification of aesthetic judgements.

⁴⁰ Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 434.