

On the 'sense of beauty'

Elisabeth Schellekens
Durham University

I

It is often held, in philosophical and non-philosophical circles alike, that the more informed we are about art, the better placed we are to appreciate it. That is to say, the more we know about, for example, the historical setting in which a work was produced and the artist's intentions in producing it, the better equipped we are to enjoy all the layers of that work's meaning and symbolic references, and so to appreciate its artistic accomplishment and aesthetic value.

At least at a first glance, knowledge to do with ontological status seems to be no exception to this rule-of-thumb: knowing that a work is a forgery, say, influences the way in which we perceive, assess and respond to that work. In other words, our appreciation of a work genuinely painted by Vermeer, for example, differs from our appreciation of a copy produced by Van Meegeren precisely because, of the two paintings, we know the latter not to be the genuine artwork.

A slightly more difficult case is presented by the related, albeit in some ways more complex, question about the aesthetic appreciation of objects that are visually indiscernible yet ontologically so different that only one can rightfully be described as an artwork. What, one may ask, happens when we are confronted with two objects that have exactly the same appearance, although one is a work of art and the other is not, such as with Andy Warhol's exhibited *Brillo Boxes* on one hand, and the Brillo boxes to be found in our supermarkets on the other? Will our aesthetic responses be the same, or will they differ? Furthermore, can our aesthetic response to a thing change once we know that it is, or is not, an artwork?

In Chapter 4 of his *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (hereafter ToC), Arthur Danto turns to some of the most important philosophical questions that arise from the relation between art and the aesthetic in general, and also, more particularly, from attempts to identify art in aesthetic terms. The main question, he tells us, 'is whether aesthetic

considerations belong to the definition of art' (1981: 91), or at least to the kind of artistic appreciation that must figure in such a definition. A resolution of this question, it is soon shown, requires a thorough examination of the concerns raised above, because if knowledge that a thing is an artwork *does* influence the way in which we appreciate it aesthetically, then any definition of art in terms of aesthetic considerations is likely to prove circular.

Fuelling Danto's interest in this problem are, of course, the particularly intriguing difficulties presented by pairs of objects that are visually identical yet ontologically very diverse; his self-avowed fascination with 'paired cases where only one member of the couple is an artwork' (1981: 90). One of the most pressing philosophical concerns about such pairs, Danto argues, is precisely what they indicate about theories eager to define art in aesthetic terms. For Danto, the boxes figuring in *Brillo Boxes* call for an at least in principle different (kind of) aesthetic response than the 'mere' boxes stored in our supermarkets (or Warhol's boxes as we perceive them before recognising their true ontological status).

To the question raised by way of introduction to our inquiry, then, Danto gives an affirmative answer: our aesthetic responses to art objects *do* indeed differ from our responses to objects not (immediately) perceived as art, and for that very reason, the notion of the aesthetic simply cannot feature in our definition of art. He writes:

What I wish to say is that there are two orders of aesthetic response, depending on whether the response is to an artwork or to a mere real thing that cannot be told apart from it. Hence we cannot appeal to aesthetic considerations in order to get our definition of art, inasmuch as *we need the definition of art in order to identify the sorts of aesthetic responses appropriate to works of art* in contrast with mere real things. (1981: 94-95 my italics)

According to Danto, then, rather than art calling for a definition formulated in aesthetic terms, it is aesthetic appreciation (of art) that calls for a definition of art, so that we may identify it and appreciate it appropriately.

II

One of the many important philosophical ramifications of the view presented by Danto in Chapter 4 of ToC concerns the origin and nature of the specific kind of sensibility exercised in aesthetic appreciation. For this sensibility, which Danto refers to as ‘an aesthetic sense, or a sense of beauty’ (1981: 95) is, it is held, unlikely to be innate if our aesthetic responses change once we know that some thing is an artwork. It will, in Danto’s words, ‘be extremely difficult to suppose that aesthetic response is at all like a form of sense-perception... if our knowledge that one is an artwork is what makes the difference in how we respond’ (1981: 91). The idea here is obviously that if knowledge of an object’s ontological status is capable of affecting the aesthetic response we have to that object, then aesthetic sensibility will in significant respects be dissimilar to ordinary sense-perception, since such perception, we are told, cannot be manipulated or altered by knowledge in a similar fashion.

For Danto, there are two main analogues with which aesthetic sensibility may be compared. We can try to grasp this ‘sense of beauty’, either by understanding it ‘on the model of the sense of sight, or... it might rather be more like the sense of humor’ (1981: 96). Having discarded the former alternative, to my mind somewhat too quickly, Danto proceeds to a very thought-provoking discussion of the similarities that prevail between this ‘sense of beauty’ and the sense of humour. (Another sense which Danto considers in this context is that of ‘sexual response’ (1981: 97). However, as this sense is primarily treated in virtue of sharing the features of the sense of humour, I will limit my examination of the comparison to the latter sense). For Danto,

the sense of humor consists in part at least in *responding* to certain things because they are amusing. Laughter, when at a thing or act because the thing or act is comical, is a good enough example of what I mean by a response, though of course there are other modes of response. But there is more to the matter than this. Having a sense of humor affects one’s life globally; one does not take everything tragically or earnestly; one looks on the light side; one mutes misfortune with jokes – having a sense of humor is almost like having a philosophy. Something of the same sort is true of the aesthetic sense... (1981: 96-97)

It is regrettable that the concern isolated by Danto in Chapter 4, and which he in my opinion rightly considers as one of the central questions of the philosophy of art, is so

seldom addressed in the academic literature. With some notable exceptions, the question of what exactly aesthetic sensibility might consist of and how it operates is largely overlooked in our investigations into aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgement, and even the perception of aesthetic qualities. Nevertheless, as I see it, the alternatives offered by Danto on this issue, namely an ‘innate sense’ such as sight on one hand, and a sense more based on ‘responding’ (1981: 96) such as humour on the other hand, are too coarsely cast to capture what is really at stake in understanding aesthetic sensibility. It seems to me that it ought to be possible not only *not* to reject either alternative outright, but also to come to see that, once given a reading a little more refined, they need not be mutually exclusive.

Whilst it is certainly true that aesthetic perceptiveness and sensibility cannot be modelled exclusively on what seems to be a relatively mechanistic conception of sight, it is, nonetheless, difficult to deny that it does allow for certain important similarities with ordinary perception. We do, after all, grasp aesthetic qualities by seeing, hearing, and feeling them. Sense-perception is not only instrumental for accessing aesthetic experiences and responses; aesthetic perceptiveness and sensibility can also be just as epistemically direct and unmediated as sense-perception. We can, for example, be struck by how dynamic a sculpture looks, or feel ‘hit’ by the sound of a particularly powerful sonata.

Similarly, whilst Danto does seem right to point out that aesthetic sensitivity, rather like the sense of humour, involves an element of response (an at least partly socially developed and acquired one at that), it also seems incongruous to take that to suggest that our experience of the beautiful can be accounted for by a close analogy with our experience of the funny. First, the funny, perhaps rather like the sexy as Danto himself suggests, is to a far greater extent determined by the individual perceiver. Second, there is no parallel in the aesthetic appreciation of artworks to the perfectly reasonable claim that we perceive a particular situation as comical or our partner as sexy at some moments in time but not so at others – we do not, after all, deem a great work of art such as Bach’s *St Matthew’s Passion* beautiful at some times but not so at others. The proposed analogy holds in so far as we do not always *experience* our partner as sexy, a particular situation as funny, or the *St Matthew’s Passion* as beautiful. But whilst it does

make sense to say of the first two that they are at some times sexy or funny and at other times not, we cannot say of an artwork like Bach's *St Matthew's Passion* that it is only beautiful at those times that we experience it as such.

In what follows I shall make a few simple yet I think important points about aesthetic sensibility and Danto's treatment of it in the first half of Chapter 4. In effect, I will develop and flesh out the reasons, scantily sketched directly above, for why I consider the alternatives offered by Danto to be relatively impoverished readings of the options available to us on this issue. In so doing, my aim is to show that these two kinds of alternatives need not be mutually exclusive in the way suggested by him. For Danto's view on this question is simply that 'responsiveness does not go with the so-called five senses' (1981: 97).

I will begin by briefly outlining another position, one defended by Frank Sibley, on the question of how aesthetic sensibility operates. I will argue that this position manages to incorporate the main tenets of both alternatives discussed by Danto. I will then proceed to a short discussion of why Danto seems to conceive of the aforementioned distinction in such contrasting terms, and, moreover, why I think that that conception is misguided. On a final note, I will draw some of the implications of such a revised conception of aesthetic sensibility for the claims we started off by examining in relation to Danto's views regarding knowledge of objects and the way it may affect our aesthetic responses.

III

From the very outset of his widely read paper 'Aesthetic Concepts', Frank Sibley places aesthetic sensibility at the centre-stage of philosophical aesthetics by identifying aesthetic predicates and expressions in terms of that sensibility. He writes:

We say... that a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving; that a picture lacks balance, or has a certain serenity and repose... The making of such remarks as these requires the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation. Accordingly, when a word or expression is such that taste and perceptiveness is required in order to apply it, I shall call it an

aesthetic term or expression, and I shall, correspondingly, speak of *aesthetic* concepts or taste concepts. (1959: 421)

That which distinguishes aesthetic predicates and expressions from their non-aesthetic counterparts, then, is that the application of the former requires the exercise of our aesthetic sensitivity.

Let us set aside, however, the question of *defining* aesthetic sensibility, and focus instead on our primary concern in the present context, namely whether aesthetic sensibility as conceived by Sibley can help us supersede the contrast drawn by Danto between ‘innate senses’ and senses such as humour. If Sibley’s account is to help us in the task we have set it, it needs to be able to explain how aesthetic perceptiveness can be said to be analogous to ordinary perception albeit in a way that fails to exclude the fundamental involvement of aesthetic responses. I therefore suggest that we begin by turning to the manner in which aesthetic perception may, for Sibley, be somewhat like Danto’s ‘innate sense’.

According to Sibley, ‘aesthetics deals with a kind of perception’ (1965: 137). Aesthetic sensibility is not merely *like* sense-perception in some important respects, but a kind of perception in its own right. What is more, this kind of perception is (at least in principle) accessible to us all. Often, he writes,

people with normal intelligence and good eyesight and hearing lack, at least in some measure, the sensitivity required to apply them... taste or sensitivity is somewhat more rare than certain other human capacities; people who exhibit a sensitivity both wide-ranging and refined are a minority... But almost everybody is able to exercise taste to some degree and in some matters.’ (1959: 423)

We may draw from this passage the idea that whilst, according to Sibley, we are all endowed with aesthetic sensibility *qua* perceptive ability, some of us develop that sensibility more than others, and this difference accounts for why some of us have a greater aesthetic sensibility than others. What aesthetic perception amounts to, Sibley explains, is simply

to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a color scheme, *feel* the power of a novel...

unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them. (1965: 137)

What is seen, then, when we exercise our aesthetic perceptiveness and sensibility, is not so much the art object as the qualities of grace and gaudiness of that art object; what is heard is not so much the musical piece as its very plaintiveness. 'To suppose', Sibley continues, 'that one can make aesthetic judgements without aesthetic perception, say, by following some rule of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment' (1965: 137). Aesthetic judgements can thus only be made on the basis of direct first-hand perceptual experience of the quality under scrutiny and the thing to which it is ascribed (or not).

Nonetheless, Sibley's conception of aesthetic sensibility also rests on some of the features that Danto rightly considers fundamental to the 'sense of beauty' (and which leads him to favour a comparison with the sense of humour). For at the very heart of the distinctive aesthetic perceptiveness that Sibley describes is precisely the responsiveness that Danto takes to direct him away from the analogy with sense-perception. Aesthetic perception, for Sibley, involves responding to things because they are graceful or dainty, rather like 'humor consists in part at least in *responding* to certain things because they are amusing' (1981: 96-97). That, on Sibley's account, is precisely what sets aesthetic perception apart from ordinary perception; it is why he qualifies as 'ludicrous' the suggestion that 'aesthetic sensitivity, perceptiveness, or taste' might be involved in 'judgements about the shape, color, sound, wording, subject matter, or composition of things' (1959: 135). In contemporary philosophical jargon, we may say that aesthetic qualities are 'response-dependent' (Johnston 1989: 145).

There is no reason to assume, however, that aesthetic responses will always have the same character: at times the aesthetic response implicit in Sibley's account may be emotional or affective, perhaps such as when 'we *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music' or '*feel* the power of a novel', and at others it may be 'merely' perceptual, perhaps such as when we '*see* the grace or unity of a work' (albeit it of course still in Sibley's aesthetic sense). Be that as it may, what is important to bear in mind is that, for Sibley, both responsiveness and sense-perception are two vital ingredients for aesthetic sensibility: it is the noticing, the feeling, the hearing, that is

the response necessary for aesthetic experience and the making of aesthetic judgements.

IV

Underlying Danto's conception of aesthetic sensibility as outlined in the first half of Chapter 4 is the default position he assumes in favour of a non-cognitive characterisation of aesthetic judgements and a committed anti-realism about aesthetic qualities. Already early on in his discussion, Danto tells us that

it would beg every relevant philosophical question there is to suppose that it is a matter of fact that certain things have aesthetic value or worthiness, or whether arguments over the aesthetic merits of something can be settled remotely by appeal to the sort of evidence pertinent to whether something is a work of art or not. (1981: 95)

In contrast, Sibley distances himself from positions such as these, and tells us specifically that '[w]hen I speak of taste... I shall not be dealing with questions which center upon expressions like "a matter of taste" (meaning, roughly, a matter of personal preference or liking).' Rather, Sibley is concerned 'with an ability to *notice* or *discern* things' (1959: 423). We are not at liberty, then, to ascribe these 'things' – these qualities – to objects on the basis of purely idiosyncratic reasons (as we may be with the comical, funny or sexy). Although aesthetic judgements must be grounded in direct first-hand perception for Sibley, that perception must be unprejudiced, unbiased and available to all that exercise their aesthetic sensibility. We must, in other words, be able to 'back up' our aesthetic judgements and say that an artwork ' "has an extraordinary vitality because of its free and vigorous style of drawing", or "dainty because of the delicacy and harmony of its coloring" ' (1959: 423).

However, for Danto, there is no such metaphysical framework capable of supporting an aesthetic judgement's or response's general validity. According to Danto,

[t]old that a certain wine has the taste of raspberries, I may learn to discriminate this taste, which I did not discern when I first tasted it. Yet it was there to be tasted before as well as after it has been described that way: the object did not *acquire* these qualities by being described... But the qualities an object has when an artwork are in fact so different from what an indiscernible counterpart

has when a mere real thing that it is absurd to suppose I *missed* these qualities in the latter. They were not there to be missed. (1981: 99)

On my understanding, then, it is first and foremost in virtue of working on the assumption that aesthetic judgements such as ‘x is beautiful’ have a similar epistemological status to judgements such as ‘x is funny’ – where the latter is first and foremost a matter of individual response and attribution of features that can only be said to pertain to the object in virtue of my response – that Danto finds himself forced to give up the analogy with sense-perception and settle for a description of the ‘sense of beauty’ in terms of a comparison with the sense of humour. Sense-perception affords an aesthetic objectivity that Danto does not seem ready to explore, even less defend, whereas humour slots in better with the projectivist metaphysics he accords to aesthetic qualities in Chapter 4 of his ToC.

As I see it, and more in line with Sibley’s approach, the aesthetic case does not match the humorous case in this respect: what you may consider to be funny in no way reveals either what I *do* or *should* consider to be funny. And this brings us back to what I mentioned earlier regarding the variable and perhaps even somewhat erratic presence of aesthetic qualities in things on Danto’s theory. The analogy with humour seems unfitting at least partly because it seems counter-intuitive and misguided to say that a great masterpiece such as Bach’s *St Matthew’s Passion* is only beautiful when I perceive it as such. A joke is not funny when I do not, for some reason or another, not actually experience it as amusing. But Bach’s *St Matthew’s Passion* is beautiful whether I am too distracted or exhausted, say, to experience its beauty or not.

Clearly, Danto’s position on this matter is supported by his commitment to the idea, outlined above, that knowledge of a thing’s ontological status (*qua* art) does in significant respects alter our aesthetic appreciation and response to it. To use his own words,

one’s sensory experiences would not be expected to undergo alteration with changes in the description of the object; that remains invariant under changes in description... If the aesthetic sense were like the other senses, the same would be true of it, but in fact one’s aesthetic responses are often a function of what one’s beliefs about an object are. (1981: 98-99).

So, at the heart of Danto's account of the 'sense of beauty', we find the claim, so central to his philosophy of art in general, that an art object that is indiscernible from a non-art object has a different set of aesthetic qualities simply in virtue of being an artwork. What is more, the very recognition of an object's 'art-hood', so to speak, is somehow thought to accord or make it the case that that object immediately acquires a new set of aesthetic qualities. And if only for the reason that that claim underlines his conception of aesthetic sensibility, and that conception seems somewhat off the mark for the reasons outlined above, we must ask ourselves whether the claim is really both plausible and true.

Obviously, I will have to leave the substantial discussion that this very important question calls for to another time. I will end by merely suggesting that one possibility that seems promising and worth exploring in this context appeals to a philosophical distinction between aesthetic qualities and artistic qualities. Perhaps, then, one could say that what an object acquires once we have come to see its true ontology and recognise it as art is, in fact, a new set of *artistic* – rather than *aesthetic* – qualities. (Some aesthetic qualities may be included in this set of artistic qualities, but not necessarily so.) After all, if an object is an artwork, it is likely to have artistic qualities that a non-art object lacks. That way, it may be possible to sidestep the problematic issue of how knowledge of an artwork seems to lead us to a position whereby aesthetic sensibility cannot be satisfactorily accounted for.

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