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Normativity and *Thick Aesthetic Concepts*

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Abstract: Thick aesthetic concepts such as 'gracious', 'delicate' and 'virtuous' are, according to the standard theory, characterised as both descriptive and evaluative. In the first part of this paper (I), I examine Sibley's study of normativity with regard to his version of thick aesthetic concepts. In the second part (II), I concentrate on Zangwill's recourse to Grice's theory of implicature and the normative demands this move makes on the process. Finally (III), I develop a sketch that shows which contextual considerations precede the selection process of thick aesthetic concepts and how normative demands govern eventual selections.

Thick aesthetic concepts[1] such as 'gracious', 'delicate' and 'virtuous' are, according to the standard theory, characterised as both descriptive and evaluative. In the first part of this paper (I), I examine Sibley's study of normativity with regard to his version of thick aesthetic concepts. In the second part (II), I concentrate on Zangwill's recourse to Grice's theory of implicature and the normative demands this move makes on the process. Finally (III), I develop a sketch that shows which contextual considerations precede the selection process of thick aesthetic concepts and how normative demands govern eventual selections. On this basis, I hope to offer an alternative to the implicature model.

I. SIBLEY ON NORMATIVITY AND MEANING

In his essay "Particularity, Art, and Evaluation", Sibley distinguishes three types of evaluative terms discussed in the aesthetics literature: (1) *solely evaluative terms*, (2) *descriptive merit-terms*, and (3) *evaluation-added property terms*, which Sibley calls thick aesthetic concepts.[2] For this third category to be relevant, Sibley assumes there must be rules for its use. This rule makes two normative demands. First, to be descriptive, the concept must indicate that a particular object has a particular property P. Secondly, the speaker expresses his attitude to the quality P in forms of either appreciation or deprecation. When one learns the use of such concepts as 'graceful', 'elegant' or 'garish', one simultaneously learns that the correct application of these concepts is tied to these two rules and that aesthetics is the field of application. Sibley makes it clear that he is not in a position to seriously doubt the existence of such a class of concepts. But Sibley wonders what guarantees the normative application of the rules? With respect to the descriptive element he offers the following explanation: When a merit-term P (such as graceful) is applied to a property x there must be something else which is also true of x. There must be determining properties which, for example, allow the object to be characterised as graceful. It is not enough, however, to observe that a drawn line in a picture can be characterised, for example, as 'curved', but rather a specific and particular form of being curved must be present. The test of whether a particular line is to be considered graceful remains 'an open question to be decided by inspection'.[3]

It is at the boundary between ethics and aesthetics that this becomes particularly clear. While truth conditionality is possible for thick moral concepts precisely because particular *descriptions* of facts (Q) about x are adequate, from which we can infer that *x is P*, in aesthetics we have particular properties (Q) from which we can infer that *x is P*. In aesthetics the particular properties of an object are facts which determine whether a concept is used correctly. Rather than rely on the descriptions of others, one must look directly at the aesthetic object to decide which concepts are most appropriate. But it is not enough to perceive a particular fact. It is furthermore necessary to perceive the peculiarity of the fact. According to Sibley, two facts must be perceivable, namely: (a) the property (curved) and (b) curved in a particular way (gracefully).

If we examine Sibley's claim that rules exist for the use of evaluation-added property terms, we see that there are in fact a large number of them. To summarise, these are: (1) Use the concept both descriptively and evaluatively. (2) The rules of use of the descriptive component are substantiated as follows: (2a) Such concepts are used correctly if there is at least one further property Q. (2b) This property must be perceivable. (2c) Furthermore the particular manner of occurrence of these properties (P) must be perceivable. If Q and P exist as facts, are perceivable, and (2d) do not depend on

third party testimony, then the statement *x is P* is true. Thus Sibley is here discussing the correctness conditions of aesthetic judgements with evaluation-added property terms.

II. ZANGWILL'S PERSPECTIVE

In his 1995 essay "The Beautiful, the Dainty, and the Dumpy", Zangwill is particularly concerned with the question of whether thick aesthetic concepts are intrinsically evaluative and therefore, whether their evaluative role contributes anything to their meaning.[4] After debating whether these two components ought to be separated, so as to avoid this problem, Zangwill avoids separation by proposing an alternative solution. He recommends adding the proposition 'that these substantive descriptions have *no evaluative content whatsoever*'.[5] If such conceptual components do not generate meaning, Zangwill realises that they fall within the scope of conversational implicatures: 'So evaluation is not part of the *content* or *sense* of the judgement. Instead, we infer that the person making the judgement also makes the evaluative judgement from the use of the language in a context'.[6] Zangwill thus adopts an approach originated by Paul Grice, who considers a conversation's implicatures entirely cancelable, since they do not contribute content.

What are the consequences for Zangwill's conception of normativity of aesthetic judgements with regard to thick aesthetic concepts? In his essay "Aesthetic Realism I", he discusses the problem of the normativity of aesthetic judgements in a different context.[7] Zangwill considers Hume to have already recognised the necessity of norms in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste", even though he could not offer a convincing strategy. Zangwill thinks the same of Kant, Scruton, and Blackburn. According to Zangwill, the source of normativity of aesthetic judgement is whether they possess real representational content, because it is this which ensures that a judgement is more correct than a competing one. He considers this normative demand particularly applicable to the use of thick aesthetic concepts given this argument: Aesthetic experiences represent aesthetic states of affairs, situations or facts. In aesthetic experiences the world is represented as having genuine aesthetic properties. We, for example as hearers, perceive sounds as if they represent actual aesthetic properties such as 'passion', 'poignancy', 'anger', 'elegance' or 'beauty'. This is particularly applicable to thick aesthetic concepts because they indicate metaphysically fundamental aesthetic properties. For Zangwill, it is clear that these are 'properties in the world'.[8]

If, as per Zangwill, aesthetic facts or properties are the source of normativity, with the evaluative component—sourced out to implicatures—not contributing anything, then evaluations fall entirely into the scope of the non-normative. How does he justify that with regard to thick aesthetic concepts the evaluative component of the concept does not contribute anything to its meaning? He tries to solve this problem with the aid of an open-question argu-

ment. If in every conceivable case it remains an open question (i.e., it cannot be definitively settled) whether a substantial aesthetic property, represented by a thick concept, is identified as good or bad, then one could conclude that the evaluation is not an intrinsic part of the concept but rather falls within the scope of implicature, which can be determined from the context.[9]

In Paragraph (x)[10] it is, however, noted that this does not resolve the problem completely, since it is not possible to provide a complete proof of the non-existence of intrinsically evaluative concepts. Although this may at first appear disappointing, Zangwill remains optimistic and offers an alternative solution. According to this the question of whether evaluation is intrinsic is negligible, since it is the role of thick aesthetic concepts to mediate between non-aesthetic properties and thin aesthetic concepts, which are entirely evaluative. Within the bounds of this determination, Zangwill develops two ways of mediation. Either concepts have an evaluative content and are thus intrinsic, and their determination is analytic. Alternatively they are not intrinsic, and their determination is non-analytic. If we examine this argument in detail, we notice that this evasive manoeuvre threatens his original strategy of the open-question argument, which was meant to show that evaluation is not a part of the normative with regard to meaning, but rather falls into the scope of implicature. Zangwill hereby admits that there are in fact cases in which no implicature exists and evaluation is thus an intrinsic factor.

Consider that he earlier stated that meaning had no evaluative part 'whatsoever'.[11] The underlying question is why Zangwill, as well as Jerold Levinson, consider the implicature-model is so attractive. I suspect that they appreciate it for the following reason: According to Grice, implicature can be suspended without generating semantic anomalies. This would thus also be true for evaluation. Zangwill is thereby reacting to thick aesthetic concepts which are not necessarily followed by some form of evaluation. This problem is generally termed evaluative flexibility. Levinson, who is only interested in showing that there are no intrinsic cases, gives the following example:

> Grace would seem to be aesthetically contraindicated in an expressionist painting or sculpture of the mass executions at Babi Yar. If so, then even gracefulness may not be, *tout court*, a *pro tanto* merit in works of art, and the positive evaluative overtones of its attribution to a work may be only a matter of conversational implication.[12]

The idea of placing evaluation in the scope of implicature does, however, have consequences for the theory of meaning. Grice distinguishes between conventional and conversational implicatures.[13] Zangwill and Levinson favour the second version for their approach, whereby evaluation ceases to have any meaning-generating function and is excluded entirely from the sphere of the conventional or the normative.[14] I wish to argue the contrary, since evaluation is tied to norms and can in certain circumstances generate meaning, all the while acknowledging the phenomenon of evaluative flexibility.

III. NORMATIVITY AND THICK AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

I now wish to defend three theses with regard to the use of thick aesthetic concepts: (i) Realistic representational content is not the source of normativity, at least not if we take normativity to mean *correctness* with regard to aesthetic properties. (ii) We must, in this context, use the term *adequacy* rather than *correctness*. (iii) We can avoid resorting to conversational implicature to explain evaluation if we consider normativity from the perspective of contextual considerations. I thus examine those considerations which play a constitutive role in selecting thick aesthetic concepts, in order to identify norms that come into play during the selection of such concepts. In that regard, I do not make any claims to completeness. What I propose is more of a sketch expressed in a series of claims.

(1) In the debate surrounding the normativity of meaning and conceptual content there is one aspect of particular significance: The status of correctness conditions. These, roughly said, give the conditions under which one employs a concept.[15] It is, however, problematic to demand, as Sibley and Zangwill do, strict correctness conditions in the case of the use of thick aesthetic concepts. Whether a concept like graceful was predicated correctly or incorrectly is a question of context and of the intention of the user. Even if these are sufficiently determined there still remains an ambiguity as to whether the concept is interpreted to have been used correctly or incorrectly. That is why I favour the term *adequacy* in this context. The use of thick aesthetic concepts is subject to contextual adequacy conditions, which have a normative character.

(2) Thick aesthetic concepts are used adequately if at least the following contextual considerations are respected: (i) Information about the recipient/audience, (a) aspiration level (e.g. scientific or unscientific), (b) presupposed knowledge/possible contextual knowledge, (ii) the form of expression, (a) conversation (e.g. public or private), (b) the form of the text (e.g. review, critique), (c) the medium used (e.g. newspaper, internet, television; regional/national), (iii) possible fields of use of the description: (a) acts, (b) landscapes, (c) attitudes or characters of individuals, (d) architecture, (iv) possible forms of evaluation: (a) positive, (b) negative, (c) no evaluation, (d) suspension of the form of evaluation/change of opinion, (v) the purpose of expression (e.g. to convince or to describe), (vi) the object of the aesthetic investigation: (a) artistic performance (e.g. theatre or ballet), (b) musical performance (e.g. opera, musical, concert), (c) painting, (vid) sculpture.

(3) These categories have a pivotal function when it comes to concept selection.

Example: A critic who is reviewing a ballet for a national newspaper with an upmarket audience will: resort to a sophisticated non-scientific language, use terminology appropriate to an aesthetic investigation, bring

knowledge of different types of texts, have an intention to convince the reader of his opinion of the piece, be informed of the various conceptual possibilities of evaluation, and know which thick aesthetic concepts should be applied.

(4) Contextual considerations are accompanied by normative demands.
Example: (I) Use language appropriate to the audience. (II) Take into consideration that written texts, as opposed to conversations, do not offer the possibility of non-verbal communication. (III) Adjust the form of expression to the medium or type of text. (IV) Consider three modes and two additional rules when using thick aesthetic concepts: Such concepts can be accompanied by either (i) a positive or (ii) a negative evaluation. There are cases in which such concepts are used (iii) purely descriptively. Thick aesthetic concepts are flexible with regard to evaluation. (For example if one describes the playing of a violinist as virtuosic, one could be referring to his technical finesse. An outstanding technical performance can, however, be considered unfeeling and flat and thus be assessed negatively.) One of the three modes (i), (ii) or (iii) must necessarily be applied. (V) Decide whether something is to be described or an audience is to be convinced of an opinion, since thick aesthetic concept should be used evaluatively in acts of persuasion. (VI) Adjust the choice of concept to the object of aesthetic investigation.

(5) Contextual considerations have an intentional character since a purposive decision must be made.
Example: If one has the purpose of evaluating the aesthetic actions of an actress appearing in a play in the context of a review for a specialist website and uses thick aesthetic concepts to do so, then one decides not to describe a landscape, which can be seen painted in oils at an art gallery.

(6) The contextual considerations and their accompanying norms precede concept use and are thus constitutive for it.

(7) On the consequential level two socio-normative constraints come into use: (i) Rule of license: Use a concept only when it is adequate to the contextual considerations and their accompanying norms. (ii) Rule of sanction: The violation of these conditions results in certain sanctions.
Example: If the above critic writes the review in the terminology of a technical instruction manual and thus violates the norms underlying the different types of text, he will most likely be sanctioned through his piece not being accepted for publication. If, on the other hand, the review respects the underlying norms it may be accepted for publication. In that case the critic is licensed.

(8) Presupposing this model, one is not forced to take a stance on whether evaluation is intrinsic to thick aesthetic concepts or the relationship is an extrinsic one, such as implicature. From the perspective of an investigation of the normativity of this class of concepts it becomes clear that the selection of adequate concepts depends on rules determined by the given

context. Description and evaluation thus fall—among other categories—within the scope of the normative. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic thus becomes superfluous and one escapes the many problems inherent to the use of the implicature model.

(9) If evaluation falls within the scope of the normative, then it frequently is a meaning-generating component. There are however cases in which concepts such as 'graceful' or 'delicate' are used purely descriptively. This depends on the context and the intention. In descriptive use no contribution to the generation of meaning is made.

IV. CONCLUSION

If one accepts the rules of use of thick aesthetic concepts proposed by Sibley, then one is obligated to accept that evaluation is a part of the normative. From Zangwill's perspective this is problematic precisely because one then has to explain whether description and evaluation can be isolated from one another as two separate components or not. Zangwill's solution is to banish evaluation to the realm of conversational implicature. It turns out however that Zangwill is not able—and doesn't really want—to show that the evaluative component is not part of the meaning in all possible cases.

The solution sketched in this paper does not assume, as Sibley does, that the descriptive and evaluative components are sufficient to explain the use of concepts in this context. Furthermore the question of isolation is treated as immaterial. It is only contextual considerations and their accompanying norms that can explain which processes precede the use of thick aesthetic concepts. Thereby it is, however, also shown that these go far beyond descriptive and evaluative considerations. Contextual considerations on the one hand encompass description and evaluation. On the other hand, they fall entirely within the scope of the normative because they are tied to certain rules which determine the use of concepts. Such a solution has, at the same time, consequences for the theory of meaning of thick aesthetic concepts. Whether evaluation is a part of the meaning depends on the context and on the intention of the concept user. Evaluation is a variable component, for or against which one can decide to be, depending on the context.

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NOTES

1. I use the term thick aesthetic concepts here, even though Sibley and Zangwill each resort to different terminology.
2. Sibley 2001, first published in 1974.
3. Sibley 2001, 97.
4. Zangwill 1995.
5. Zangwill 1995, 322.
6. Zangwill 1995, 322.
7. Zangwill 2005.
8. Zangwill 2013, 206.
9. If a concept is *intrinsically evaluative* then, according to Zangwill, the evaluation is

part of the [meaning].

10. Cf. Zangwill 1995, 324.
11. Cf. Zangwill 1995, 322.
12. Levinson 2006, 318, fn. 13.
13. Cf. Grice 1989, 25.
14. It is not for this reason alone that the recourse to implicature is problematic. Grice's theory has been questioned on numerous occasions. Cf. for example, the work of Davis 1998, Lepore and Stone 2015, Pinker 2007 and Saul 2010. It remains to be examined to what extent those difficulties persist for the recourse to Grice with regard to thick aesthetic concepts.
15. Boghossian 1989, Blackburn 1984, 281 and Miller 1998, 281, for example, are of the view that correctness conditions represent normative demands.

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