Aesthetic Ineffability

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Abstract:

This essay provides an overview of the ways in which contemporary philosophers have tried to make sense of ineffability as encountered in aesthetic contexts. Section 1 sets up the problem of aesthetic ineffability by putting it into historical perspective. Section 2 specifies the kinds of questions that may be raised with regard to aesthetic ineffability, as well as the kinds of answer each one of those questions would require. Section 3 investigates arguments that seek to locate aesthetic ineffability within the object of aesthetic experiences, i.e. within aesthetic content. Section 4 discusses arguments that seek to locate aesthetic ineffability within the subject of aesthetic experience.

The idea that there are things in the world that cannot be captured in language has "one of the longest and most distinguished of philosophical histories" (Moore, *Human Finitude*, 427). Within philosophical sub-fields, the concept of ineffability has been particularly prominent in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. A dialogue in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* describes the phenomenon in a nutshell:

> "I am inclined to say: "These notes say something glorious, but I do not know what." These notes are a powerful gesture, but I cannot put anything side by side with it that will serve as an explanation. A grave nod. James: "We lack the words." Then why don't we introduce new ones? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?" (Wittgenstein §610)

This essay provides an overview of the ways in which contemporary philosophers have tried to make sense of ineffability as encountered in aesthetic contexts.[1] It is divided into four parts. Section 1 sets up the problem of aesthetic ineffability by putting it into historical perspective and clarifying some key concepts. Section 2 specifies the kinds of questions that may be raised with regard to aesthetic

[1] Aesthetic experiences do not necessarily presuppose the presence of a work of art: they can also occur in the presence of extraordinarily impressive natural settings (Adorno speaks of the "Naturschöne", Kant of the "Sublime"). For the sake of simplicity, I will restrict the examples of my argument to aesthetic experiences afforded by works of art. However, all arguments that will be discussed can potentially be applied to aesthetic experiences in nature as well. For some recent discussion of environmental aesthetics, see for example: Berleant 2005, 2012; Brady 2003, 2013; Carlson 2008; Parsons 2008a and 2008b; and Saito 2007.

ineffability, as well as the kinds of answer each one of those questions would require. Section 3 investigates arguments that seek to locate aesthetic ineffability within the *object* of aesthetic experiences, i.e. within aesthetic content. Section 4 discusses arguments that seek to locate aesthetic ineffability within the *subject* of aesthetic experience. The conclusion summarizes the current state of the debate and indicates the most promising directions for further research on aesthetic ineffability.

1 History and Terminology

The conviction that there are aspects of reality that cannot be expressed in language, even though our minds can somehow grasp them, is as old as philosophy itself. Already in the ancient writings of Gorgias we find an argument with a substantial ineffability thesis about some aspects of reality (Sextus Empiricus 7.65), as well as in several Daoist scriptures (e.g. Laozi §1, §41) and in Plotinus' *Enneads* (e.g. Book V, Ch. 3, Passage 13). In medieval times, the ineffability of God was a central theme in Maimonides' writings (e.g. 204). It also appears in several places of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (e.g. Ia.12, IIa-IIae.11.3-4) as well as in his famous prayer "Creator ineffabilis". Kant speaks of the world as a "showplace of manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty" that can be grasped only in "speechless, but nonetheless eloquent, astonishment." (e.g. Kant 1998 [1787]: B650). Schopenhauer speaks similarly of the 'Will', the most fundamental ontological category, or essence, of the world (e.g. §31). Also Nietzsche (e.g. 880), Heidegger (e.g. *Language*, 59), Adorno (*Hegel*, 102), and Wittgenstein (e.g. *Tractatus*, §5.62, §6.522) argue, each in their own way, that reality or some aspects thereof cannot be grasped by language.

While it is in this sense indeed true to say that "the spirit of ineffability in philosophy is subtly pervasive" (Sheffer 129), it is also true that the special connection between ineffability and aesthetics only started to emerge in the writings of the

romanticists of the eighteenth century. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant argues that aesthetic ideas are "representations that provoke more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words" (177), a notion later picked up by Schelling (e.g. 231), Schopenhauer (e.g. §31), Heidegger (*Work of Art*, 204, 206), and Adorno (*Aesthetic Theory*, 126-129), all of whom advance the closely related idea that art manages to communicate something that is essentially beyond the reach of language.

But what exactly does it mean to say that an artwork is ineffable? What is the relevant notion of ineffability in this context? After all, something can be ineffable for trivial reasons, i.e. reasons that are in principle removable. For example, my name is "ineffable" to a person who doesn't know it, but this ineffability would disappear as soon as I would tell her my name. However, aesthetic ineffability is *not* trivial in this way – it cannot be "removed" in any obvious way.

What counts as ineffable also depends on what counts as 'language' (Only natural languages? If so, only literal or also metaphorical? Or is art perhaps a language of its own?) and who counts as a 'competent speaker' (A native speaker of the language in question? A person with significant knowledge of art? A professional art critic?). Depending on how we define 'language' and 'speaker', and depending on which obstacles to expression we count as trivial or not, there are numerous ways of defining ineffability, and every definition will be to a significant extent a matter of choice rather than a matter of necessity.

The concept of aesthetic ineffability used in this essay denotes a kind of ineffability that is (a) absolute, i.e. not subject-dependent; (b) non-trivial in the sense of essentially unremovable; and (c) relates to natural languages (nd competent speakers of natural languages) only, literally interpreted. A bit more formally,

> An aesthetic item y [e.g. a work of art; an aesthetic experience[2]] is ineffable if and only if it is metaphysically impossible that there be a linguistic item x [e.g. a sentence, utterance, or proposition] whose content non-trivially and literally entails the content of y and whose content is, in principle, comprehensible by and communicable to beings with a human cognitive appartus.[3]

These choices are not arbitrary: I believe that they best reflect the way aesthetic ineffability is intuitively understood. The way the concept is used in the literature (see the section on history above and sections 2-4) suggests that aesthetic ineffability is commonly thought of as universal, i.e. subject-independent, and non-trivial. The focus on natural-language ineffability is justified by the same reasoning, in addition to the technical factor that it is not at all clear what the semantics of a non-linguistic language would look like – a question that would need to be clarified before an investigation of aesthetic ineffability could even get started. The focus on literal language is necessary in order to exclude an interpretation of aesthetic ineffability according to which every piece of literature or poetry trivially expresses itself.

A further distinction that needs to be made is between 'expression' and 'description.' An artwork whose meaning or content is taken to be ineffable will still be describable. The meaning of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* might be ineffable in the sense clarified above, though it is perfectly possible to describe that object as a porcelain urinal that was converted into an object of art, etc. Intuitively, an expression captures the full content of whatever is expressed, whereas a description usually covers only parts.

This leads us straight to the next question: what exactly do we mean when we speak of 'content'? It is a term with numerous interpretations, and it is not clear that

[2] What we call an 'aesthetic item' depends on how we ascribe the predicate 'aesthetic:' sometimes it is the object of an experience that is called 'aesthetic,' sometimes it is the experience itself that is called 'aesthetic,' sometimes both (see below).
[3] For an extensive discussion of the various ways in which ineffability can be defined, and of the factors that determine such a definition, see Jonas 2016: 38-49.

we have all the same thing in mind when we speak about the content of a work of art. One important distinction that needs to be mentioned is the distinction between propositional and non-propositional content. The content of a sentence is propositional, whereas the content of a perceptual experience is non-propositional. Poetry is an essentially propositional art form, painting an essentially non-propositional one, pop music is a hybrid. Usually, what is understood by the 'content of a work of art' is the conjunction of its propositional content (if it has any), its perceptual features,[4] and a third element that may or may not be reducible to a combination of the other two elements and that is sometimes identified with the artwork's *meaning*. The question of aesthetic ineffability can also be understood as the question whether (some) works of art have a meaning that goes beyond the sum of its propositional and perceptual components.[5]

Philosophical examinations of aesthetic ineffability have been sparse – only few contemporary philosophers have examined the topic in any detail. Before we can proceed to a discussion of the main accounts that have so far been put forth, we must identify the different possible questions that may be asked with regard to aesthetic ineffability.

[4] Since the perceptual features of an artwork then determine the content of the mental state of the perceiving subject, an artwork's perceptual features are sometimes referred to as the artwork's perceptual content.

[5] Compare Simon Blackburn's definition of (linguistic) meaning: "Whatever it is that makes what would otherwise be mere sounds and inscriptions into instruments of communication and understanding." (Blackburn 1996: 235) A suitable adaptation for works of art should include, besides sounds and inscriptions, such things as colours, forms, movements, etc.

2 What Exactly Are We Asking?

Works of art are often perceived as expressive,[6] and hence, as having content. In order to discriminate between the content of works of art and other types of content, such as propositional content or the content of ordinary perceptual experience, the content of works of art is referred to as *aesthetic content*. What distinguishes aesthetic content from other types of content is that it can evoke a feeling of meaningfulness, i.e. a feeling phenomenally similar to ordinary states of understanding, that resists linguistic expression: works of art cannot be 'paraphrased' or 'translated' into (literal) language without remainder (cf. Kennick, *Art*, 309). This is just a different way of saying that the meaning of a work of art is perceived as more than a combination of its propositional and perceptual components, which in turn suggests that aesthetic content is inextricably linked to its respective form of presentation: the contents of a symphony by Gustav Mahler, for example, can only be expressed in its musical form, not linguistically.[7] Trying to separate aesthetic content from its specific form of presentation means committing the proverbial 'heresy of paraphrase'. In this sense, aesthetic content can be said to be ineffable.

In addition to having content, works of art also afford experiences. In order to discriminate between ordinary perceptual experiences and experiences afforded by

[6] There is no agreement over the question whether *all* artworks, including conceptual or performance art, are expressive, and whether aesthetic experiences of natural settings require nature to be expressive. Object-based accounts of aesthetic ineffability must presuppose the expressiveness of all artworks and natural settings in order to explain aesthetic ineffability. Subject-based accounts are better equipped to accommodate the intuition that only some aesthetic experiences are due to the presence of an expressive artwork or natural setting (see below).

[7] I will ignore complications such as the question whether or not a different work of art (say, a poem) could potentially express the contents of a Mahler symphony. As mentioned in section 1, answering such a question would require a clear account of non-linguistic semantics based on which we can decide whether or not two works of art express the same content. Since there are no such accounts, every answer to the question whether or not different works of art can express the same content would be mere speculation.

works of art, the latter are referred to as *aesthetic experiences*. What distinguishes aesthetic experiences from other types of experience is that they often involve a specific state of mind that is impossible to put into language: no expression seems adequate to capture the quality of being in that state of mind.

The reason it is important to point out the difference between aesthetic experience and aesthetic content is that aesthetic ineffability could either be a matter of a specific type of ineffable content, or a matter of a specific type of ineffable state of mind. There are thus two principal directions for an investigation of the ineffability associated with aesthetic contexts: we can look for an explanation of aesthetic ineffability within the *object* of aesthetic experiences, i.e. within works of arts and their contents, or we can turn to the *subject* of an aesthetic experience.

In addition to these two principal directions, we need to get a clear picture of the possible questions that may be raised with regard to aesthetic ineffability. One question we could be asking is *why* aesthetic content cannot be translated into literal language, or more precisely, what reason there is to believe that it is *in principle* impossible, for any given piece of aesthetic content AC, to provide rules of translation from AC in its 'aesthetic' expression into a 'literal' expression, such that applying those rules will result in a conceptual equivalent of AC. In order to answer this question, an account if aesthetic ineffability has to provide, as it were, a "technical" reason for the untranslatability of aesthetic content into language.

However, given that not only aesthetic contents but also the phenomenal contents of ordinary sense perceptions ("qualia") have been argued to be ineffable,[8] a second question we might be interested in is what, if anything, distinguishes the

[8] See, for example, Jackson 1982, 1986; McDowell 1998; Moore 1997; Nagel 1974. For an overview of the debate about the ineffability of qualia, see Jonas 2016 Chs. 3 and 5.

(reasons for) aesthetic ineffability from the ineffability of the phenomenal contents of ordinary sense perceptions. In order to answer this question, an account has to provide an explanation of ineffability that applies *only* to aesthetic contexts. Moreover, such an account would have to apply uniformly to *all* instances of aesthetic ineffability: to the visual and musical arts as well as to literature and poetry, and across all genres of artistic expression (representational, conceptual, performative). It is not at all clear that it is possible to develop a uniform account that ranges across such a disparate assortment of things. However, *on the non-trivial assumption* that experiences of aesthetic ineffability are phenomenally similar even though the respective artistic genre may differ, it would be desirable for any theory to provide a uniform explanation of aesthetic ineffability independently of artistic genres.

A third question that could be raised is why the ineffability we experience in aesthetic contexts feels *meaningful*. This is an extremely important question, given that it is the aspect of meaningfulness that distinguishes aesthetic ineffability from other, more trivial forms of ineffability (such as the ineffability of our ordinary perceptual experiences).

Ideally, a theory of aesthetic ineffability should address all three of the above mentioned questions, thus providing (a) an explanation of the *untranslatability* of aesthetic content that (b) applies uniformly to *all and only* instances of aesthetic ineffability that (c) explains our evaluation of that ineffability as *meaningful*. In fact, however, most accounts of aesthetic ineffability address only a subset of those questions, and (as was mentioned above) it is not clear that one uniform account could ever answer all three questions.

We will now examine each account with regard to the questions identified above, starting with accounts that locate aesthetic ineffability within the object of an

aesthetic experience (section 3). We will then proceed to accounts that locate aesthetic ineffability within the subject of an aesthetic experience (section 4).

3 Aesthetic Ineffability: A Matter of Aesthetic Content?

The most straightforward way to explain the ineffability found in aesthetic contexts is to invoke an intrinsic difference between aesthetic and linguistic content. Arguments of this kind are based on two premises. The first premise is that aesthetic content is (in some vaguely specified way) intrinsically different from linguistic content.[9] The second premise is that no translation between such intrinsically different contents is possible. From these two premises, the conclusion is inferred that aesthetic content cannot be translated into linguistic content. Arguments to this effect have been provided, for example, by Susanne Langer and John Dewey. Langer argues that

> "every work of art expresses, more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions which the artist has, but feelings and emotions which the artist knows ... Such knowledge is not expressible in ordinary discourse. The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are too high, too spiritual, or too anything-else, but that the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concepts of feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language. Verbal statement ... is almost useless for conveying knowledge about the precise character of our affective life." (Langer 91)

For her, works of art are symbols that *present* ideas and emotions (rather than *describing* them). Similarly, Dewey argues that works of art manage to express what is unavailable in language. He writes:

> "If all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, the arts of painting and music would not exist. There are values and meanings that can be expressed only by immediately visible and audible qualities, and to ask what they mean in the sense of something that can be put into words is to deny their distinctive existence." (Dewey 77)

[9] To be perfectly accurate, we should speak of *literal* linguistic content here: after all, poems are works of art with linguistic content. For simplicity's sake, I will continue to use the term 'linguistic content', and if not otherwise stated, I will mean *literal* linguistic content by that.

So according to both Langer and Dewey, art manages to express certain types of phenomenal content – for example the phenomenal character of emotions such as fear, hate love, etc. (Dewey 67) –, in a way that is 'more true' to those emotions than a linguistic expression could ever be.

The crucial question now is how this alleged additional expressive power should be explained: is it some mysterious property that gives aesthetic content its expressive power? If so, no arguments to this effect have been developed. The mysterious expressiveness of aesthetic content has more often been *declared* than properly *argued for*. What has been argued for, on the other hand, is that the expressive power of aesthetic content *trivially* surpasses that of language. This is because we can never experience a proposition in the way we can experience a work of art:

> "poems and paintings have meanings and values that ordinary prose descriptions do not have. Pictures have colour, depth, balance, chiaroscuro, design; propositions do not. Poems have measured rhythm and rhyme, striking images and involved metaphors; ordinary prose statements do not. These are things we enjoy in pictures and poems, but they do not express values that cannot be expressed in words; they are 'values' that prose statements do not ordinarily have." (Kennick , *Art*, 316).

In other words, the means of aesthetic expression *trivially* outstrip those of linguistic expression: propositions appeal mainly to our cognitive abilities whereas works of art appeal to all five senses of perception. A colour or a tone cannot be rendered in language, just like a protractor cannot draw square circles (Kennick, *Art*, 318). There is no mystery here, only a category mistake.

For this reason, Stephen Davies argues that we should resist the temptation to think that works of art communicate ineffable truths. He explains aesthetic ineffability, specifically in music, with "a degree of detail and resolution in auditory expressions that exceeds the possibility of verbal description or specification, and not some new dimension of the eternal verities" (161). What distinguishes perceptual experiences from linguistic descriptions thereof is the "seamless plenitude" (159) of the former.

Based on this, he concludes that there is no reason for us to consider aesthetic ineffability anymore puzzling than ordinary perceptual ineffability.

Kennick and Davies thus maintain that aesthetic content is ineffable for the same (trivial) reasons other phenomenal experiences are ineffable, and that arguments trying to establish a difference between aesthetic ineffability and ordinary phenomenal ineffability are misguided. However, such a view fails to make sense of the meaningfulness associated with aesthetic ineffability (in contradistinction to ordinary instances of ineffability): unlike ordinary phenomenal experiences such as looking at a red wall, aesthetic experiences are phenomenally similar to states of understanding. What arguments like Kennick's and Davies' do manage to show, however, is that simply postulating an intrinsic difference between aesthetic content and other, more familiar kinds of content, is not sufficient. If we are to believe in a genuine difference between aesthetic and ordinary perceptual content, we must be given a substantial explanation for this difference.

John Spackman and Diana Raffman argue that the expressive qualities of some works of art, especially in music, are more fine-grained than our conceptual resources. According to Spackman, this is because the number of potential connections we can make between a given work of art on the one hand, and the human emotions that can be argued to be expressed by it on the other, is likely to be higher than those specified in any actual description (Spackman 2012: 308). However, this should not lead us to conclude that every single work of art expresses one unique emotion, given that we can think of cases where two works of art differ slightly with regard to their perceptual qualities without differing with regard to the emotion they express. Spackman argues only for a moderate ineffability claim: our interpretations of

works of art could always *potentially* be expanded by additional suitable descriptions, but none of these potential descriptions is *in principle* ineffable.

Raffman develops a different argument for the fine-grained-ness of aesthetic content (1988, 1993). Focusing on the example of ineffable musical experiences, she argues that certain musical 'nuances' can often not be mentally categorized ('type-identified') in the way necessary for verbal expression. Employing cognitivist theories of perception (Fodor 1983) as well as examinations of generative grammar for tonal music (Lehrdahl and Jackendoff 1983), Raffman argues that the source of musical ineffability lies somewhere in "the unconscious computation of a series of increasingly abstract mental representations of an acoustic signal" (Raffman 1993: 4). She develops a threefold account of musical ineffability, with 'structural ineffability' denoting certain limitations in a listener's access to the way in which she represents musical structure, 'feeling ineffability' denoting the ineffable aspect of every perceptual/ phenomenal experience, including musical experience, and 'nuance ineffability' denoting our inability to cognitively classify certain aspects of music too fine-grained for cognitive conceptualization. More precisely, Raffman argues (83ff.) that certain auditory nuances are recovered too early in the processes involved in representing musical signals (i.e. on the "shallowest" levels of these processes), so that we fail to mentally categorize them in the manner necessary for conceptualization.

Fineness-of-grain accounts thus provide a "technical" reason for aesthetic ineffability, but no way to separate aesthetic from non-aesthetic instances of ineffability, and no explanation of the associated meaningfulness. Roger Scruton criticises Raffman's account for this very reason and points out that "the sense of an ineffable meaning is a rare phenomenon, in comparison to the abundance of tonal music" (1997: 200) – a fact that cannot be explained on the basis of a fineness-of-grain

account of ineffability. Also Jerrold Levinson (1995) holds that "the ineffability of greatest interest" (201) within the context of music cannot be explained in terms of a mere difficulty in denoting certain auditory nuances. Moreover, as Raffman herself concedes (1993: 84), it is not clear that the kind of ineffability she describes cannot be overcome, for example by enlarging our discriminative abilities through certain types of auditory training. Thus, her argument provides no reason to believe that aesthetic content is *in principle* ineffable.

Arguments from demonstrative concepts give us additional reason to believe that a mere fineness of grain cannot establish the kind of aesthetic ineffability we are after. As argued by McDowell (1994) for the case of perceptual content in general, and by Spackman (2012) and Jonas (2016) for aesthetic content in particular, the fineness of grain of any given perceptual input can always be captured by a combined use of demonstrative concepts (such as 'this' or 'that') with a higher-order sortal (such as 'red' or 'scarlet' or 'sadness').[10] Even if a visual shade or tonal nuance we perceive in a given work of art is so fine that no expression in our *current* conceptual repertoire captures it accurately, we always have the option of picking the shade or nuance out demonstratively, while using a higher-order sortal to point in the relevant direction: '*That* shade of red!' or '*That* melancholy tone!'. Such a demonstration can then serve as the basis for establishing a canonical term for whatever has been picked out ('Let's call *that* shade of red 'scarlet' and *that* shade of blue 'Le bleu de Chartres!'). It is reasonable to believe that such processes are involved in any case of language expansion.

[10] Such a demonstrative strategy is also implicit in Tiger Roholt's (2010) argument that musical nuances can be made effable by comparison, for example by comparing a certain kind of brightness in a given piece of music ('*This* brightness!') to the brightness achieved in a different piece of music ('*That* brightness!').

A different class of arguments tries to account for aesthetic ineffability, not with a difference in *nature* between ordinary cognitive content on the one hand, and aesthetic content on the other, but rather, with a difference in *function*.

Rafael DeClercq employs a cognitive account by Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch (1975) in order to explain the ineffability of aesthetic content in terms of the way such content functions. According to Polanyi and Prosch, the structure of perceptual awareness is twofold, i.e. characterized by a focal and a subsidiary aspect: there are some elements we attend to focally, and some we attend to merely subsidiarily. When we read a letter, for example, our focal attention is usually on the content of the letter, whereas we give only subsidiary attention to secondary aspects, such as the structure of the paper, or even the language the letter is written in (DeClercq 93). This view can be supported by the fact that we tend to remember whatever we attended to focally in a perceptual experience, whereas we tend to forget whatever we attended to only subsidiarily.

What distinguishes ordinary perceptual from aesthetic experience is that in the latter case, both the focal and the subsidiary aspects of the experience are appreciated in their own right:

> "On the one hand, we focus intensely on the character (say, the beauty) of an object. Yet on the other hand, we retain awareness, equally intense, of something that lies outside the focus of our attention. To be more precise: while focussing on the aesthetic character of the object, we attend in a subsidiary manner to whatever it is that lends this focal object its special significance" (DeClercq 93)."

What is ineffable about an aesthetic experience on this account is the interplay of subsidiary elements (such as the bass line, the melody, the brush strokes, the rhyme, etc.) and "the way these various parts contribute to and are integrated into a whole" (DeClercq 96). A subsidiary element of a work of art is unspecifiable, and thus ineffable, because "as soon as we shift our attention to it and start to examine it focally, its meaning changes" (DeClercq 94). In other words, as soon as we try to focus

on the subsidiary elements, they stop being subsidiary and thus, change their character.

Despite the fact that DeClercq's account of a twofold structure of perceptual awareness has some intuitive plausibility, it is not clear why it should be in principle impossible to attend focally to the subsidiary elements of a work of art, for example to the way a work of art integrates its different elements into a composite whole. It may be true that we *typically* don't attend to subsidiary elements when we perceive a work of art, but this does not mean that we cannot attend to them *in principle*. Further argument is needed in order to establish such a claim. Moreover, just as the above discussed fineness-of-grain accounts, DeClercq's theory does explain the meaningfulness that attaches to aesthetic, but not to ordinary perceptual experiences.

Michael Luntley finds another way of arguing that some musical content differs from ordinary perceptual content in the functional role it plays for our perceptual experiences. What makes his argument stand out is that it is designed specifically to resist counterarguments to aesthetic ineffability that employ the notion of demonstrative concepts (as discussed in section 4). Luntley begins by explaining that only those parts of our perceptual contents that can potentially figure in a person's "space of reasons" are apt to be captured by our (demonstrative) concepts:

> "If subject S has a conceptual capacity for discriminating F-ness (their experience represents F-ness in some way), the representation of F-ness must be capable of contributing to the rational organization of their behaviour by figuring in their inferential reasons for belief/action. ... The capacity to discriminate F-ness as contributing to the content of the subject's experience is non-conceptual if and only if the capacity cannot contribute to the subject's rational organization of their behaviour." (Luntley 406/ 407)

In other words, only contents that can potentially be employed in the deliberative processes that guide our beliefs and actions can be brought into conceptual form. He then goes on to argue that some musical experiences, notably those that involve inexperienced listeners, feature ineffable content that cannot even be captured by the

use of demonstrative concepts. For example, a musical novice will be able to hear and discriminate the specific tonal quality of a dominant 7th chord (its 'pulling-towards-resolution'), but due to her lack of musical education, the novice will lack the vocabulary, specifically the higher-order sortals, that would be necessary to generate a demonstrative concept. But without the ability to capture a piece of content, even if only by means of a compound demonstrative concept, it is impossible for it to figure in a person' space of reasons, i.e. in the inferences a person draws in order to rationally organize their beliefs and behaviour. Hence, Luntley concludes, we have a case of non-conceptual content.

Luntley's argument is interesting because it takes into account the notion of demonstrative concepts by means of which most fineness-of-grain arguments can be disabled, and because it makes the specific functional role of being able to feature in a subject's space of reasons a condition for the expressibility of a given piece of content. However, the argument does not provide a satisfactory account of aesthetic ineffability for three reasons.[11] The first one is that musical training would likely remove the novice's inability to demonstratively point out a given piece of musical content. Hence, Luntley's argument is an argument for relative ineffability only: at best, it shows why some pieces of musical content are ineffable relative to an inexperienced listener, but nothing in his argument gives us reason to think that some musical qualities are in principle ineffable. Second, his examples are strictly auditory (in fact, he concedes that it is unlikely that his argument could be made for a visual case, given the richness of everyone's, even the novice's, visual vocabulary – Luntley 418), so that his account cannot explain all and only cases of aesthetic ineffability. Third, Luntley's argument is unsuitable to explain the meaningfulness of aesthetic ineffability. This is

[11] To be fair, it must be noted that the goal of Luntley' argument is to make a case for non-conceptual content in music that resists capture by demonstrative concepts; his goal is not to explain aesthetic ineffability.

because, arguably, the meaningfulness of aesthetic content is not a function of a person's conceptual resources: both a novice and an experienced listener (i.e. a person whose broad musical vocabulary would enable her to express whatever tonal nuance she wished) would feel unable to express the meaningfulness of a piece of music. Luntley's account offers no explanation for this fact.

It thus seems fair to conclude that arguments seeking to locate aesthetic ineffability within the *object* of an aesthetic experience, i.e. within aesthetic content itself, at best manage to establish a relative, rather than an absolute kind of ineffability. Moreover, they don't offer a uniform account applicable to all and only aesthetic genres; and most importantly, they don't provide an explanation for the meaningfulness associated with aesthetic ineffability. We will now turn to accounts that seek to locate aesthetic ineffability within the *subject* of an aesthetic experience.

4 Aesthetic Ineffability – A Matter of Ineffable Knowledge?

Object-based accounts of ineffability are based on the intuition that it is something about *the artwork itself* that is ineffable, and hence, explains the experience of ineffability. Subject-based accounts, on the other hand, are founded on the intuition that we do not necessarily need to presuppose the existence of artworks expressing ineffable contents in order to explain aesthetic ineffability. Rather, aesthetic ineffability can be explained as a feature of the *experience* of an artwork, rather than the artwork itself.

An intuitive argument for the claim that aesthetic ineffability thus originates in the subject's experience rather than in the artwork is that aesthetic experiences are not necessarily repeatable: two people can have different reactions to the same work of art, one of them experiencing it as ineffably meaningful, the other experiencing it as rubbish. Likewise, one and the same person can have different reactions to the same

work of art at two different points in time. Malcolm Budd seems to have a related thought in mind when he argues that it is not their meaning that makes artworks seem irreplaceable us, but rather, the extraordinary experiences they afford (84-85). Also Roger Scruton holds that "If we value art, it is partly because it introduces new states of mind, by providing the expressive gestures that convey them." (361f) So the question is whether there is reason to believe that it is the aesthetic experience itself that is ineffable, and not something about the work of art itself. In other words, do aesthetic experiences afford states of mind that cannot be put into words?

Roger Scruton argues that the ineffability of aesthetic experiences stems from the fact that perceiving a work of art can give us 'first-person awareness' (364) of certain emotions embodied in a work of art. This is because they encourage *Einfühlung* (German for 'empathy'), an imaginative projection of one's own perspective into the perspective of another. In order to understand the ineffability claim contained in this picture, Scruton draws the following parallel between ordinary perceptual cases and the aesthetic case. We can imagine Siegfried, a person who has never felt fear in his life, but who knows how fear is described by those who have felt it themselves. So Siegfried has descriptive, third-person knowledge of what feeling fear is like, but he lacks first-person knowledge – knowledge-by-acquaintance.[12] Scruton now argues that one way for Siegfried to acquire first-person knowledge of fear is by *Einfühlung*:

> "There is a kind of response to your face and gestures which makes your first-person perspective available to me. I imagine what it is like to be you, feeling this; I then entertain your emotion within my own point of view. There is nothing to be *said* about what I thereby come to know, for there is no new proposition that I know." (Scruton 362)

Once we accept this claim, it seems like a small step to the aesthetic case:

[12] Scruton's description here is structurally analogous to Frank Jackson's Mary (Jackson 1986), a poor creature confined to a black-and-white room who knows every descriptive physical fact about colour perception, but who lacks first-person experience of colours such as red.

> "The ineffability of artistic meaning is, I suggest, simply a special case of the ineffability of first-person awareness – the impossibility of translating 'what it is like' into a description." (Scruton 362/364)

However, as plausible as this step may seem at first, it leaves several crucial questions open. For example: *whose* perspective, emotions, or inner life do we gain awareness of in aesthetic experiences? The artist's? But that seems odd, given that an artist could have written a sad piece of music without having felt sad himself. It seems more likely that what Scruton had in mind was that we get acquainted with particular emotions, such as sadness or joy, independently of a subject feeling those emotions. Yet this interpretation clearly implies a number of contentious metaphysical assumptions, for example that there exist universals (such as emotions) that we can get acquainted with; that works of art express emotions; that the emotions expressed by a work of art are determinate, etc. For some, committing themselves to all those assumptions might be too high a price to pay for a theory of aesthetic ineffability.

However, Scruton's account of aesthetic ineffability also has several merits: though developed with regard to music, his account can be applied to all artistic genres: a painting can give us knowledge-by-acquaintance of a certain emotion just as a piece of music, a sculpture, or a performance could. Moreover, Scruton's account has at least some potential to explain the meaningfulness associated with aesthetic ineffability: if the ineffability of aesthetic experiences consists in gaining first-person knowledge of certain deep emotions, then it is precisely our experience of those emotions that can account for us being deeply moved.

At this point, however, one might object that *Einfühlung* can also happen, say, when we read the newspaper and empathize with the suffering of refugees – *Einfühlung* doesn't require the presence of a work of art – but we don't experience meaningful ineffability while reading newspapers. Hence, it is not clear that the concept of *Einfühlung* captures something that is unique to aesthetic experiences, and thus,

uniquely characterizes aesthetic ineffability. But perhaps it is indeed misguided to look at aesthetic ineffability as a unique concept in need of a unique explanation. Perhaps we need to gain some understanding of the *general* concept of ineffability before we can understand the sub-category of *aesthetic* ineffability. This brings us to our final approach.

In (2016), Silvia Jonas argues that meaningful ineffable experiences occur in aesthetic as well as religious and philosophical contexts. She then raises the question how the ineffability experienced in such moments can be explained metaphysically. Four potential candidates are examined – ineffable objects and properties; ineffable propositions; ineffable content; and ineffable knowledge – and Jonas argues that only the latter has the potential to explain ineffability in a metaphysically coherent way, i.e. in a way that doesn't require us to introduce doubtful ontological categories, which then need to be squared with our existing ontology. While the term 'knowledge' in philosophy is often associated with *propositional* knowledge, she argues that also ineffable (non-propositional) forms of knowledge pervade our lives: knowledge-how, indexical knowledge and phenomenal knowledge (gained through acquaintance) are all not suitable for linguistic expression. However, they also don't strike us as particularly meaningful. Jonas argues that the reason those forms of knowledge are ineffable is that they are self-referential: knowledge-how enables the move from a description of how to ride a bike to riding a bike *ourselves*; indexical knowledge enables the correct *self*-ascription of properties and thus, locating ourselves in the world; phenomenal knowledge accommodates the *what-it-is-like for ourselves* of getting acquainted with the world through sense-perception. Given that these forms of knowledge clearly imply the existence of a (possibly primitive, possibly ontologically thin) entity that we call the 'Self' and that is the ultimate reference point for every

human experience, Jonas suggests that meaningful ineffability, as experienced in (some) aesthetic, religious, and philosophical contexts, consists in getting phenomenally acquainted with that Self (Jonas 167ff). This way of understanding aesthetic ineffability, i.e. as a sub-category of the larger category of meaningful ineffability, provides an answer to all three questions identified at the beginning, at the price of aligning aesthetic ineffability with other forms of ineffability not necessarily connected to works of art or aesthetic experiences. Thus, Jonas' account provides an explanation of the ineffability of aesthetic experiences in terms of the general, well-known, and unmysterious ineffability of phenomenal knowledge (161ff); it thus applies uniformly to all instances of aesthetic ineffability as well as to religious and philosophical ineffability; and it can account for the meaningfulness we associate with aesthetic ineffability through the Self the object we get acquainted with.

5 Conclusion: Whereto From Here?

Depending on which of the three main questions with regard to aesthetic ineffability one is most interested in, different accounts are on offer. Most work has gone into finding a "technical" reason for aesthetic ineffability, while questions regarding the uniformity of aesthetic ineffability and the distinction between aesthetic and ordinary perceptual ineffability are still underdeveloped. The aspect of meaningfulness is arguably best explained by accounts locating aesthetic ineffability within the subject, rather than the object, of aesthetic ineffability, though further research on this would be desirable. A question that remains open until today is why some works of art seem to trigger ineffable experiences, whereas others do not. But this is a question that arises for all accounts of ineffability, and perhaps one that art critics are better equipped to answer than philosophers.

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