RESPONSES TO IRVIN AND SCHELLEKENS

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Responding to critics is not always a happy task. The book has been published. So, short of having all the existing copies pulped and writing a new book, not much can be changed. Typically, there are three kinds of responses to critical remarks: clarifications (if the critic got something wrong), concessions (if the author got something wrong), or some new directions for future research. It is a true mark of the quality of the two sets of comments on my book by Sherri Irvin and Elisabeth Schellekens that almost all of their comments open up exciting new directions for future research (some of which I have tried to undertake in some pieces I published since the publication of the book [thus the uncharacteristic and somewhat inelegant preponderance of self-references in this piece], but most of which are still to be undertaken).

But I have to start with a concession, albeit a somewhat unusual one. I think I might have made something of a marketing mistake when writing the book. As I explain in the précis above, my main aim with this book was to argue that the toolkit of philosophy of perception can be very useful in tackling problems in aesthetics. My secondary aim was to zoom in on the concept of attention and examine how aesthetics could benefit from taking this concept seriously (one important consequence of this would be a shift from talk about aesthetic properties to talk about aesthetically relevant properties).

It was my third, not at all central, aim to argue that a special way of exercising our attention, in a manner that focuses on an object but distributed among its properties, plays an important role in some instances of aesthetic experiences. The marketing mistake was to start the book with this third, relatively minor point since frontloading this material made it seem as if this tertiary aim of the book were the central one. It was not. But it is also understandable, given that I start the book with it, that readers would attribute more importance to this than I would have expected. This is not much of a concession – I still stand by my account of aesthetic attention, but if someone is not persuaded of the role this kind of attention plays in some of our aesthetic experiences, they have no reason not to take my other two, much broader, aims of the book seriously (the emphasis on attention and the general methodological proposal about using philosophy of perception).

Sherri Irvin opens her comments with a vivid and evocative description of an aesthetic experience she had on her patio. She describes her experience of

attending to 'the tangle of leaves and the many colours of green' and noticing 'the very slight movement of branches in a subtle breeze'. She also felt a 'sensation of air on [her] skin' and also 'the pressure of [her] elbow against [her] hip and the expansion of [her] torso and shifts in fabric against [her] skin as [she] breathed'.[1]

This experience seems very similar to the kind of experience I wanted to capture in the book, but there is a major difference, which makes Irvin's example a potential counterexample to my account. In her example, her attention is distributed among different properties – that fits my account very well. But her attention does not seem to be focused at all. Her attention is distributed across a variety of objects – the leaves, the branches, the air, the fabric. So this is a major difference from the 'focused on one object, distributed across many properties' account I have advocated. The leaves and the branches are clearly very different from the air or the fabric – they are even perceived in different sense modalities. Is this a counterexample to my account then?

I should say that I really like the vivid description of Irvin's aesthetic experience and I believe that it is a very similar kind of experience as the one I was trying to capture in the book. And I would be very happy to acknowledge the difference between her aesthetic experience and the aesthetic experiences I was focusing on. While the book is about our aesthetic engagements with all kinds of things (of art, of nature, of everyday scenes), in introducing the idea of distributed attention, I was mainly concerned with the aesthetic experiences of artworks. And at least when it comes to artworks, the focused attention part of the experience is quite important, inasmuch as it captures an influential idea in the history of aesthetics concerning the unity of our experience of artworks.[2]

The general idea here is that engaging with an artwork entails taking it in as a single, integrated whole (this is a Kantian idea, which played an important role in Romanticism [for example, in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel], but it was also highly influential in twentieth-century Anglo-American aesthetics, for example, in Monroe Beardsley's work).[3] And while this might be an important aspect of our

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1 Sherri Irvin, 'The Nature of Aesthetic Experience and the Role of the Sciences in Aesthetic Theorizing: Remarks on the Work of Nanay and Smith', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 102. See also her 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 29–44, which is the best philosophical discussion of aesthetic experience of everyday scenes I know of.

2 See also my 'Aesthetic Attention', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 22 (2015): 96–118; 'Defamiliarization and the Unprompted (Not Innocent) Eye', *nonsite.org*, no. 24 (2018): 1–17, https://nonsite.org/article/defamiliarization-and-the-unprompted-not-innocent-eye.

3 See Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

aesthetic engagement with works of art, this might not be so important when it comes to our aesthetic engagement with nature or with everyday scenes. It would be an exciting and novel project to explore the systematic differences between how our aesthetic attention is exercised in engaging with artworks on the one hand and with nature and everyday scenes on the other.

In the book, I made some preliminary remarks about how the attention's 'focusing on one object' is a bit more complicated in the case of our aesthetic experience of nature. When admiring a landscape, for example, the object we are focusing our attention on is not one tree or one bush, but the landscape – often a vast scene, which would make it a bit difficult to fully appreciate just in what sense this kind of aesthetic attention could be called 'focused'. So, when we have an aesthetic experience of a painting, in some sense our attention is focused on the perceived object in a way that it is not focused on the perceived object in the case of looking at a landscape.

Kant's (and Beardsley's) emphasis on the concept of formal unity would be applicable in both cases, but I agree with Irvin (and Schlegel) that this common denominator would paper over important differences. An important continuation of the project I started in the book would be to study the differences between aesthetic experiences of artworks on the one hand and of nature and everyday scenes on the other from the point of view of how focused our attention is (and what it focuses on if it is).[4] And I take Irvin's vivid description of her aesthetic experience of an everyday scene on her patio to be a very good demonstration of something that *is* in common between these kinds of aesthetic experience of everyday scenes and the kinds of aesthetic experience I was talking about – namely, that our attention is distributed across many properties.

The main focus of Elisabeth Schellekens's commentary is my reliance on what I call the 'lingering effect' of aesthetic experiences. When you spend an entire day in the museum and you walk home afterwards, the drab bus stop may look to you like one of the pictures in the museum. And when leaving a good concert or movie, the ugly, grey, dirty streetscape can look positively beautiful. It seems that aesthetic experiences often do not stop when the contemplation of the object of the aesthetic experience stops. After leaving the concert hall or the cinema, one may still see the world differently. In the book, I explain this 'lingering effect' as a perceptual phenomenon: the way we exercise our perceptual attention is not something we can deliberately change from one moment to the other. And as a crucial characteristic of aesthetic experiences is the way our attention is

[4] I scratch the surface of this vast project in 'Aesthetic Experience of Artworks and Everyday Scenes', *Monist* 101 (2018): 71–82.

exercised, what we should expect is that these experiences would only fade out slowly after the actual aesthetic engagement is over. We should expect that aesthetic experiences would have a lingering effect.

Schellekens objects to my explanation of this phenomenon – namely, that I explain the lingering effect as a perceptual and attentional effect and not as the effect of 'mental states, such as the beliefs pertaining to states of affairs external to the work and our perception of it, including our moral beliefs and deliberations' and 'insights'.[5]

These remarks, again, point towards an interesting potential future research project. We can gain insights and acquire moral beliefs from artworks – no question about this.[6] But I was talking about a different, much less intellectual phenomenon. Art often teaches us about morality and the human condition, but, to use the famous Ad Reinhardt bon mot, it is also true that 'art teaches us how to see'.[7] In general, we should not ignore the strong perceptual (and, I would add, attentional) effect of engaging with artworks.

Here, in support of my claim, is a longish quote from Marcel Proust:

> Since I had seen such things depicted in water-colours by Elstir, I sought to find again in reality, I cherished, as though for their poetic beauty, the broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another, the swollen convexity of a discarded napkin upon which the sun would patch a scrap of yellow velvet, the half-empty glass which thus shewed to greater advantage the noble sweep of its curved sides, and, in the heart of its translucent crystal, clear as frozen daylight, a dreg of wine, dusky but sparkling with reflected lights, the displacement of solid objects, the transmutation of liquids by the effect of light and shade, the shifting colour of the plums which passed from green to blue and from blue to golden yellow in the half-plundered dish, the chairs, like a group of old ladies, that came twice daily to take their places round the white cloth spread on the table as on an altar at which were celebrated the rites of the palate, where in the hollows of oyster-shells a few drops of lustral water had gathered as in tiny holy water stoups of stone; I tried to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist, in the most ordinary things, in the profundities of 'still life'.[8]

Marcel sees the world differently after having seen the Elstir watercolours. This effect does not come from insights or moral beliefs. It comes from perceptual and attentional differences. Proust himself emphasizes the importance of attention in this perceptual shift in the quote above.

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5 Elisabeth Schellekens, 'Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 113, 114.

6 See, for example, my 'Philosophy versus Literature: Against the Discontinuity Thesis', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 349–60.

7 Ad Reinhardt, 'How to Look at Things through a Wine-Glass', *PM*, 7 July 1946.

8 Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Vintage, 1970), 325.

But this is not supposed to be an appeal to authority in response to Schellekens's objection (although I can't think of a better authority on this topic than Proust). The new research direction that Schellekens's comment points to is about how the perceptual 'lingering effect' and the more cerebral effects of engaging with works of art interact.[9] This is also what I take to be in the background of Schellekens's more 'big-picture' worry about my approach – namely, that it reduces the subject of aesthetic engagement to a 'perceiver'.

One of the reasons why I take the concept of attention to be so important in aesthetics is because our perceptual experience depends heavily on what we are attending to and how we do so. And given that our attention depends on what we know and believe (but also on our expectations, hopes, and aspirations), this means that our perceptual experiences (and, a fortiori, our perceptual aesthetic experiences) very much depend on our higher-order mental states.[10] Another important mediator of these top-down influences on our perceptual aesthetic experiences, something I only talk about in passing in the book but that I have been exploring since, is mental imagery. Our perceptual experience very much depends on the mental imagery we use to fill in the gaps of the scene in front of us and mental imagery depends on our background beliefs, knowledge, and expectations.[11] Our aesthetic engagement is complex. But so is perceptual experience. Both can and very often do depend heavily on higher-level mental states. I don't think we should worry about thinking of the aesthetic subject as a perceiver. A lot goes into being a perceiver.[12]

My final response is to a remark Schellekens makes passingly about how aesthetic value might be the combination of aesthetic properties and aesthetically relevant properties (and how the lingering effect might depend on this combination). I deliberately avoided discussing aesthetic value in the book and I will continue to do so here. This has to do with a fourth aim of the book, which is more of a public relations manoeuvre, not so much a bona fide philosophical aim.

Philosophical disciplines are often divided between what is described as 'value theory' on the one hand and 'metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed'

[9] I say more on this in 'Aesthetic Experience of Artworks and Everyday Scenes', but definitely not enough.

[10] See also my 'Cognitive Penetration and the Gallery of Indiscernibles', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, no. 1527 (2015): 1–3, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01527.Nanay 2015a.

[11] Bence Nanay, 'Perception and the Arts', in *Art and Philosophy*, ed. Christy Mag Uidhir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); *Seeing Things You Don't See* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[12] See also my 'Against Aesthetic Judgment', in *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment*, ed. Jennifer McMahon (London: Routledge, 2018), 52–65.

on the other. Value theory is supposed to encompass ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics (among others). Metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed is supposed to encompass philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science (besides, obviously, metaphysics and epistemology). These categories are used a lot in job ads and in classifications of philosophy papers, so a lot depends on which bag aesthetics is put into.

And I see no reason why aesthetics would belong to the value-theory bag and not the metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed bag. Much of aesthetics is about experiences, perception, emotions, attention, and imagination, all of which are part of philosophy of mind (even if you are sceptical about the emphasis of my book on philosophy of perception). And philosophy of mind is, in turn, part of metaphysics and epistemology, broadly construed. So I do not see why aesthetic value would need to be taken to be a central concept in aesthetics. Some of our experiences are valenced. Some of our experiences matter to us a lot. These are claims about experiences, not about value (whatever that concept means).

But those who are more on the 'value-theory' end of things might want to know how aesthetic value fits into my picture of aesthetics. Even if it is not a central concept in my view, given its importance in the history of aesthetics, I need to say something about it. And I think that on this point, Schellekens is exactly right. Thinking of aesthetic value as a combination of aesthetic properties and aesthetically relevant properties seems to be on the right track. And working out the exact connection between the three concepts of aesthetic value, aesthetic properties, and aesthetically relevant properties would be a very promising new direction for future research. Another way of putting this is that the standard relation between aesthetic properties and aesthetic value is put in new perspective by the introduction of the third relatum, that of aesthetically relevant properties – properties that are such that if we attend to them, this makes an aesthetic difference.

I said above that critics are supposed to talk about aesthetically relevant properties and not aesthetic properties. If a critic says that a painting is beautiful or graceful, she is not doing her job right. She should draw our attention to properties that we have not noticed that are such that when we notice them, it transforms our experience. And I think that this is by and large true. But I did add in the book briefly that it is part of the critic's job to talk about the relation between aesthetically relevant properties and aesthetic properties – about how an aesthetically relevant property realizes aesthetic properties. But a lot more would need to be done to work out how exactly aesthetically relevant properties combine with aesthetic properties to yield aesthetic value.

I would like to thank Sherri and Elisabeth again for comments that are not only perceptive and often charitable, but, and this is something that can be said of very few response pieces, open up new directions for future research in at least three domains: the relation between aesthetic experiences of art and of everyday scenes, the relation between perceptual and cognitive effects of engagement with works of art, and the relation between aesthetically relevant properties and aesthetic properties.

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