

The Ineffable in Art: On What Can't Be Said

York H. Gunther

Introduction

In *What to Listen for in Music*, Aaron Copland considers whether music has meaning. “My answer to that”, he maintains, “would be, ‘Yes’. ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No’.”¹ Doris Humphrey similarly surmises: “The dancer believes that his art has something to say which cannot be expressed in words or in any other way than by dancing”.² What Copland and Humphrey claim about music and dance is widely believed about nonverbal art including painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, video, and multi-media installation: their experience *cannot in principle* be articulated through language. Yet as widespread as the view may be, there have been few attempts to substantiate it and, to my knowledge, none have succeeded. It seems that two distinct challenges face the proponent of aesthetic ineffability. The first is to offer an account of the property of ineffability, and the second is to establish that such a property is instantiated by specific artworks and the aesthetic experiences elicited by them. The former, I take it, is the more fundamental task. For without knowing what ineffability is, it is not apparent that one could convincingly establish whether it is instantiated. Of course, one might wonder whether this task is not paradoxical. How, it might be asked, can one explain in words what “allegedly” cannot be put into words? Despite appearances, this is not a genuine paradox. Just as one could explain what infinity is without reverting to an infinitely long explanans, to explain ineffability does not imply an ineffable explanans.

York H. Gunther is Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Humanities and Language Division at Mahidol University International College, Thailand.

¹ Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (Toronto: Mentor Books, 1963), p. 19.

² In Jean Brown, Naomi Mindlin, Charles Woodford (eds), *The Vision of Modern Dance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1998), pp. 58-59.

The Ineffable in Art

In what follows, I offer an account of ineffability by assuming its instantiation in a number of works from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. I begin by outlining three constraints that any account should meet. Next, I review various attempts to account for ineffability. After identifying problems confronting their accounts, I outline an alternative that addresses these problems and substantiates the view to which so many, including myself, are beholden.

Three Constraints on an Account

When claiming that an experience *cannot in principle* be articulated through language, one generally is not uttering a prohibition, as when a tribe forbids the utterance of the names of their dead or a critic denounces an artwork. In his acerbic review of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* and *Ecce Homo*, it is doubtful that Paul de Saint-Victor meant to say anything about ineffability when he wrote, "Art sunk so low doesn't deserve reproach. 'Do not speak of them: observe and pass on'. Virgil says to Dante while crossing one of the abysses of hell."³ Rather, like many of his contemporaries who strolled through Room M of the Salon, Saint-Victor considered Manet's work *unspeakable*. Unlike ineffability, unspeakability is a normative property determined by artistic tastes, moral commitments, religious beliefs, societal customs, and so on, which may vary in degree and change from person to person and circumstance to circumstance. By contrast, to claim that an aesthetic experience *cannot in principle* be articulated through language is to attribute to it a descriptive property, one *invariable* through changes in human psychology, discipline, culture, and so on.

It would, therefore, be mistaken to suppose that the experience of an artwork is ineffable because an individual lacks the requisite linguistic, psychological or conceptual resources, in the way a young child is unable to describe her day at the zoo or a self-deceived pedant fails to recall a night of philandering. Explanations based on an individual's limitations, whether lexical, rational, mnemonic, conceptual, and so on, threaten to relativize ineffability out of hand, allowing experiences of one and the same work to vary in their degree of ineffability from person to person.

³ Paul Saint-Victor, 'Review of Manet in the Salon' (from *La Presse*) reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds), *Art in Theory 1815-1900* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 514-515.

Moreover, it also allows the possibility that such a work is effable and ineffable to a single individual at different times and to different individuals at the same time.

It would also be misguided to suppose that ineffability is determined by current limitations of a discipline, a culture or human understanding generally. To presume that the experience of Jean Sibelius' *Second Symphony* could completely and conclusively be articulated sometime in the future, once our aesthetic vocabulary and concepts have progressed sufficiently, in the way an accurate description of light may one day be formulated within a mature physical theory, or in the way Hegel believed that art would eventually be superseded by philosophy and its meaning clearly articulated by it, also gives the wrong emphasis to 'cannot in principle'. When understood substantively, the ineffability of an artwork or aesthetic experience is not something that individuals, disciplines, cultures, and so on, can overcome. In a word, ineffability is indefeasible.

To account for the invariability of ineffability (that is, its non-relative and indefeasible character), many writers have waxed metaphysical. Following Arthur Schopenhauer, some insist that music expresses the indivisible, inner essence of the world: "music... never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself, of every phenomenon, the will itself."⁴ Or, by appealing to Martin Heidegger's tenebrous conception of truth or Susanne Langer's evocative claim that the logic of feeling is incommensurate with the logic of language, it is supposed that the latter cannot in principle articulate truth or feeling.⁵ In other words, it is tempting to secure ineffability's non-relative and indefeasible character by positing an unchanging metaphysical presence that, as the presumed subject-matter of (nonverbal) art, remains forever out of linguistic reach.

The metaphysical view is often motivated by a version of the Isomorphic Representation Thesis. The thesis claims that only media with the same logical structure can express or represent the meaning of an artwork. An artwork, sentence or mental state must allegedly have a logical

⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 261 (§52).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', reprinted in David Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), pp. 143-206; Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), pp. 104-119.

The Ineffable in Art

structure that is isomorphic with the ontological structure of its reference, e.g. a subject-predicate (propositional) structure is only able to represent states of affairs (a thing[s] bearing a property). Since language is taken to have a logical structure that is propositional and art is not, language cannot express or represent what art does. Consequently, art is considered to be about something other than what language is. In this way, the Isomorphic Representation Thesis motivates some to posit the existence of entities that are ontologically distinct from states of affairs.

While tempting, this general approach to ineffability is unsatisfactory for several reasons. To begin, it seems entirely stipulative to account for ineffability by positing a weighty metaphysics and presuming that it is the subject-matter of all art. Why presume that all works of music, dance, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so on, express or represent the inner essence of the world or the truth of being, setting itself to work or feelings with a unique and incommensurate form? Why not suppose that nonverbal artworks are about the very same things that you and I might talk about, e.g. love, war, fear, hope or the state of the union. (It seems rather desperate to inflate one's metaphysics just for the sake of explaining ineffability.) Moreover, what evidence is there for claiming that language can only represent entities with structures like its own—why should we accept the Isomorphic Representation Thesis? Or why, for that matter, suppose that linguistic structure is essentially propositional?

Perhaps the most basic problem with these approaches concerns their mis-emphasis. It is often assumed that ineffability is a property of the reference of an aesthetic experience, of what it is about. In other words, the assumption is that there are certain *entities* that resist being represented through language, e.g. human feelings. This strikes me as utterly wrong-headed. For the problem is not that we cannot use sentences or utterances to *refer* to these entities—even if we currently do not have names for certain entities, we could surely create them! Rather, what needs explaining is why the intentional content of an artwork or aesthetic experience cannot be borne by an indicative sentence or assertoric utterance (or set thereof).

The concept of intentionality was re-introduced to modern philosophy by Franz Brentano, who claimed that intentionality, as a property, is unique and essential to mental states and experiences. It is in virtue of possessing this property, he maintained, that the mental cannot be

reduced to, or identified with, the physical.⁶ Since then, intentionality has been attributed to meaningful utterances and artworks as a way of distinguishing them, respectively, from nonsense and *mere* objects or events.⁷ Like mental states and linguistic utterances, artworks and the experiences they elicit are taken to be about objects, events, properties, states of affairs, and so on, whether real or fictional, concrete or abstract. Ineffability, then, is a purported property of the intentional content of an artwork and aesthetic experience. To claim that an artwork or aesthetic experience is *linguistically articulatable* (effable) is to claim that its intentional content can be borne by an indicative sentence or an assertion. Conversely, to claim that an artwork or aesthetic experience is *ineffable* is to claim that its content *cannot in principle* be borne by an indicative sentence or assertion.

Because aesthetic experiences have other properties besides intentionality—reference and phenomenology for instance—we should take care to distinguish them from it. As Gottlob Frege pointed out, different contents (senses) like those of ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ can be co-referential.⁸ Or consider another example. Both Auguste Rodin’s *Burghers of Calais* and Jean Froissart’s tale of the valiant self-sacrifice of the six citizens of Calais refer to the same event but nevertheless do not share the same content. Consequently, Froissart’s tale does not articulate the content of the sculpture or the aesthetic experience it elicits. Moreover, it is conceivable that the contents of different aesthetic experiences are distinct even though their phenomenological character is the same. The feelings and sensations elicited by *Burghers of Calais*, for example, may be identical to those elicited by an appropriation of the sculpture. But, as Hilary Putnam and Arthur Danto have vividly illustrated—the former through his twin earth scenario, the latter through his imagined gallery of indiscernibles—

⁶ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from the Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Antos Rancurello, D. B. Terrell and Linda McAlister (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 88.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1983), p. 27 and Arthur Danto, ‘Art and Meaning’, *The Madonna of the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. xvii-xxx.

⁸ Gottlob Frege, ‘On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*’, *The Frege Reader*, ed. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 151-171.

The Ineffable in Art

experiences that are phenomenologically indistinguishable may not have the same content.⁹

It is noteworthy that invariability (non-relativity and indefeasibility) is a property of ineffability *not* intentionality. As postmodernists are fond of claiming, aesthetic content changes from person to person, circumstance to circumstance, and even moment to moment. While I doubt that this is true to the extent that some allege, the claim that aesthetic content is radically unstable is compatible with the invariability of ineffability. In other words, the variability of intentionality does not imply the variability of ineffability.

Yet, even if the instability of aesthetic content is granted, in the case of great art these contents remain *significant*. Unlike mundane experiences, those elicited by great art “express great truths of life”, as Martha Graham put it.¹⁰ We tend to value them over mundane perceptual experiences of, say, red strawberries, creaking doors, jagged stones or fluttering laundry. In fact, as Roger Scruton observes, if all artworks, whether profound or “trite” and “meaningless” expressed contents that are ineffable, the appropriate response would be “So what?” as “this gives us no reason for thinking that music [art in general] tells us anything that we wanted to know”.¹¹ While an account of ineffability might not be expected to tell us *why* this is the case, we should expect it to accommodate the point. And of course in doing so, we should take care to avoid some of the aforementioned pitfalls. For example, it would be unduly stipulative to claim that an experience elicited by a nonverbal artwork is significant because it is about an otherworldly metaphysical presence like the inner essence of the world. And likewise, linking significance exclusively to the phenomenology of an aesthetic experience would be misguided. For strictly speaking, significance, like ineffability itself, is a property of an artwork or experience’s intentionality, not its reference or phenomenology.

⁹ Hilary Putnam, ‘The Meaning of “Meaning”’, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215-271; Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 1-32.

¹⁰ Martha Graham, ‘Martha Graham is Interviewed by Pierre Tugat’, *Dancing Times* (October 1950), p. 22. A very similar claim is made by Rafael De Clerq, ‘Aesthetic Ineffability’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 7, nos 8-9 (2000).

¹¹ Roger Scruton, ‘Effing the Ineffable’, *Big Questions Online*, November 4, 2010, at <https://www.roger-scruton.com/articles/301-effing-the-ineffable>. Accessed 17/9/2017.

Where does this leave us? We now have three constraints on an account of aesthetic ineffability:

- (1) *invariability*: ineffability is a non-relative and indefeasible property of an artwork or aesthetic experience,
- (2) *intentionality*: ineffability is a property of an artwork or experience's content and
- (3) *significance*: an experience elicited by a (great) artwork tends to be valued over mundane experiences.

I now turn to some attempts at explaining ineffability.

Psychological and Metaphysical Accounts

In *Language, Music and Mind*, Diana Raffman offers an account of musical ineffability based on the fine-grained character of perceptual experience, which she contrasts with the relative course-grained structure of our mental schema. The idea is that while we, as human beings, are able to hear subtle variations in pitch and intervals, we are often unable to name them. According to Raffman, nuances of pitch and interval (N-pitches and N-intervals) cannot be named because we cannot recognize them, and we cannot recognize them because we cannot remember them. The problem allegedly is that we lack the requisite mental schema that would enable us to remember and therefore recognize and name these musical nuances. However, "it is overwhelmingly unlikely that we have, or could have, interval schema as fine-grained as the N-pitches and N-intervals we can hear".¹² Hence, just as we cannot recognize and name each shade of color we see, we cannot recognize and name each variation in the musical parameters we hear.

Although Raffman focuses her account on the ineffability of musical experience, it is easily extended to nonverbal art generally. For example, like the experiences elicited by music, those elicited by painting, photography, dance, video, sculpture and architecture have a fineness of grain that, by outstripping our memory, we are unable to recognize or name. The shapes and shades of color in a painting or photograph, the patterns and celerity of movement in a dancework or video, and the shapes and spacial volume of sculptures and buildings are more fine-grained than the course-grained schema at our disposal. Hence, like N-pitches and N-intervals which we hear in music, we cannot name the N-shapes and N-shades we see in painting and photography, the N-patterns and N-celerity

¹² Diana Raffman, *Language, Music and Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), p. 83.

The Ineffable in Art

we see in dance or video, or the N-shapes and N-spacial volumes we see in sculpture and architecture.

While intuitive, the account has two basic flaws. The first concerns its inability to account for invariability, which is apparent in several ways. As Raffman herself observes, “it is entirely possible that some of us, with a great deal of practice, could acquire schema more fine-grained than our present chromatic ones”.¹³ Consequently, for those able to acquire more fine-grained schema, their aesthetic contents will be *less ineffable*, suggesting that ineffability is a relative rather than absolute property. Second, the course-grained structure of our schema might be supplemented and refined through scientific instrumentation and the acquisition of scientific vocabulary. For example, the specific pitches and intervals we hear can be measured and named exactly according to their frequency, pitch, and so on, providing us with a means for remembering and naming them. And third, our schema might also be refined through genetic engineering, neurotechnology or even evolution. In fact, it is conceivable that nonverbal artworks are never ineffable to certain natural or artificial entities who, by some means, have come to possess the requisite fine-grained schema.

The second problem concerns significance. In identifying ineffable content as the fine-grained character of experience, Raffman does not explain how such aesthetic contents could be valued over the contents of mundane experiences. On a daily basis I am assaulted with sights and sounds that I can neither recognize, remember nor name, allegedly because their colors, pitches, patterns of movement, and so on, are too nuanced for my course-grained schema. The experience of the redness of a strawberry, the creaking of a door, the jaggedness of a stone, or the fluttering of laundry on a clothesline has a fineness of grain that I am unable to articulate. Yet none of these sights and sounds is especially important to me. My experiences of their colors, pitches and/or patterns of movement, as nuanced as they are, do not represent ‘great truths of life’. It is, therefore, unclear how the significance we attach to an experience elicited by a work of music, painting, dance, sculpture, and so on, can be accommodated by appealing to its fineness of grain.

Roger Scruton offers an account of ineffability that initially seems to explain invariability and to accommodate significance. “The ineffability

¹³ Raffman, *Language, Music and Mind*, p. 84.

of artistic meaning is”, as he puts it, “simply a special case of the ineffability of first-person awareness—the impossibility of translating ‘what it is like’ into a description”.¹⁴ The account rests on three assumptions: first, that the mental *has* two distinct aspects, the subjective and objective; second, that there *is* a unique form of knowledge proper to each, viz. a first- and third-person perspective; and third, that language is a form of knowledge and is necessarily third-person. Like human beings, nonverbal artworks express subjective mental aspects like feelings and states of consciousness (‘what it is like’). In the case of a human being, this is done through objective mental aspects like behavior and facial expressions, while in the case of an artwork It is done through expressive gestures or features characteristic of the art form, e.g. pitches and intervals in the case of music. Although objective aspects *express* subjective aspects, the feelings and states of consciousness themselves can be *understood* only through empathy, from the first-person perspective. Since linguistic understanding is considered a form of third-person knowledge, the subjective aspects of aesthetic experiences are considered ineffable.

Because a (good) artwork “introduces new states of mind, by providing the expressive gestures that convey them”, we tend to value it over the mundane sights and sounds of red strawberries, creaking doors, jagged stones, and fluttering laundry.¹⁵ In other words, Scruton seems to accommodate significance. Moreover, since the gap between the first- and third-person perspective is taken to be unbridgeable, ineffability is an invariable feature of aesthetic content. It is neither relative from person to person or circumstance to circumstance nor defeasible by advances in human understanding. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Scruton does not attempt to secure invariability by appealing to an inflated metaphysics. As he is careful to point out, “The difference between being in pain and merely observing pain in another does not lie in the difference between an awareness of ‘subjective’ facts and an awareness of their outer expression. It lies in the difference between a first- and a third-person perspective on one and the same state of affairs.”¹⁶

For all of this, however, the account is not without flaws. To begin with, while the first- and third-person perspectives may present the same

¹⁴ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 364.

¹⁵ Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, pp. 361-362.

¹⁶ Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 362.

The Ineffable in Art

state of affairs, it is worth emphasizing that it is mental—in fact, the state of affairs of which Scruton speaks is necessarily phenomenological. For the claim is that an artwork is ineffable in virtue of the feelings and states of consciousness it expresses. In effect, this suggests a psychologistic interpretation of the subject-matter of ineffable art, one that is certainly too restrictive. Moreover, the account suggests that we value the ineffable contents of aesthetic experiences over those of mundane experiences because of an obsession we have with new phenomenological states. In other words, the so-called “great truths of life” that cannot be articulated are merely novel feelings and states of consciousness. Thus Scruton, it would seem, offers not only a psychologistic interpretation of art’s subject-matter but a hedonistic conception of its significance.

The most fundamental problem, however, concerns his explicit assumptions concerning language and the first- and third-person perspectives. Even if we grant that there are subjective and objective aspects of the mental and we accept that language is a *form* of knowledge (rather than a way of *articulating* knowledge), without support we should not accept the assumption that each aspect has a unique form of knowledge or the assumption that language can only articulate third-person perspectives. In fact, it is apparent that both assumptions are informed by a version of the Isomorphic Representation Thesis, viz. that linguistic knowledge is necessarily propositional and knowledge from the first-person is not: “its content cannot be described since it contains no proposition known”.¹⁷ But why, let me ask again, assume that language is necessarily propositional? And even if it were necessarily propositional, why can it represent or express only the objective aspects of the mental? And even if language, for whatever reason, is currently unable to represent or express ‘what it is like’, what prevents it from doing so in the future? As Thomas Nagel himself concedes, such a vocabulary might be developed:

At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination—without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination.¹⁸

¹⁷ Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 362.

¹⁸ Thomas Nagel, ‘What is it Like to be a Bat?’, *Philosophical Review*, vol. 83 (1974), p. 427.

Laird Addis suggests a partial explanation for invariability in his own account of the ineffable. Like Scruton, Addis maintains that works of music (and let us assume of any nonverbal artwork) express mental states like moods, emotions and other conscious experiences. However, according to him, the experiences of these states involve an infinite number of phenomenological properties that form a “dense continuum but for which, because of the natures of the properties involved, there can be no ‘algorithm of naming’”.¹⁹ Of course, it is not just because there are presumably an infinite number of phenomenological properties that an algorithm of naming cannot be developed. After all, in the case of the infinite series of whole numbers, we have such an algorithm. Rather, what prevents this alleged infinite number of phenomenological properties from being named is the fact that they are available only to the first-person perspective of a finite being. While the infinite subtlety of phenomenological properties is presumably *felt* by finite beings like us, our mental schema will always be too coarse-grained to allow them all to be named (since they cannot all be recognized or remembered). For irrespective of the degree to which our schema are supplemented (e.g. through scientific instrumentation) or refined (e.g. through genetic engineering), we will, as finite beings, always fall linguistically short.

It should be emphasized that even if Addis had a sound explanation for invariability, his view does no better than Scruton’s on the issue of subject-matter or significance. For his account also suggests that the subject-matter of ineffable artworks is necessarily phenomenological, implying a rather psychologistic view. And like Scruton, his conception of the significance of ineffable aesthetic contents is at best hedonistic. Moreover, while Addis seems partially to explain invariability, he leaves open the possibility that the same aesthetic experience has varying degrees of ineffability, suggesting that it is a relative, rather than absolute, property. Thus, individuals with supplemented or more refined schema will be able to recognize and remember and, therefore, name more phenomenological properties.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, one might suppose that Addis has given a substantive explanation for why ineffable aesthetic contents are indefeasible. Since any aesthetic (or, for that matter, mundane) experience

¹⁹ Laird Addis, *Of Mind and Music* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 81.

The Ineffable in Art

involves infinitely fine-grained phenomenological properties, an infinitely fine-grained schema would be required to name them. However, as finite material beings, humans (or any other material beings) cannot in principle acquire such schema, suggesting that they could never articulate the infinitely fine-grained phenomenology they presumably feel. But should we accept the claim that human beings actually experience an *infinite* number of phenomenological properties? *How* could one remain a materialist and accept this. Surely, only a finite number of phenomenological properties could supervene on a human being, which as materialists we must assume is a finite material base that can be arranged only in a finite number of ways.

The objection can be formulated as dilemma. Either Addis can deny that the mental supervenes on the physical (i.e. reject that a mental difference is possible only with a physical difference), in which case he would be advocating a form of ontological dualism and thereby ushering in an inflated metaphysics. Or he can accept the supervenience of the mental on the physical and admit that human beings can experience only a finite number of phenomenological properties, in which case his account would not explain why an algorithm of naming could not in principle be developed and, thus, why ineffability is indefeasible. By embracing the latter horn of this dilemma, his position would closely resemble Raffman's and thereby be subject to the same objection about invariability. Although Addis seems to favor the former, neither option is very welcome.

The Semantic Account

The dilemma facing Addis is, in fact, the challenge facing contemporary and historical accounts generally. Can the invariability of ineffability be explained without inflating one's metaphysics? In an effort to meet this challenge, philosophers like Raffman and Scruton offer psychological explanations. However, such accounts are problematic because they do not satisfactorily explain the invariability of ineffability. On the other hand, while Addis manages partially to explain invariability, he does so only by assuming the existence of immaterial phenomenological properties. It should be obvious that if an account is to be successful, it must steer clear of both the psychological and the metaphysical approaches that these and other philosophers advocate.

The alternative I propose is neither psychological nor metaphysical but semantic. At its heart are two claims. The first is that aesthetic force is essentially functionless and the second is that this force is an indissoluble aspect of the contents of artworks and aesthetic experiences that are ineffable. With these two claims, I believe a more promising explanation of ineffability can be formulated.

Like the sentences, utterances and intentional states, artworks and the experiences they elicit have intentionality. If they did not, then describing them as ineffable would be a category mistake since, as I mentioned earlier, ineffability is a property of the intentional content of an object, event, and so on. Yet once we grant that artworks and aesthetic experiences have intentionality, it follows that they also have *force*. Roughly speaking, aesthetic force is the way an artwork or aesthetic experiences's content is presented, akin to the way a speech act presents its content. For example, the content, *Aaron will become a musician*, can be presented through different illocutionary forces, e.g. assertion, question, promise or apology. Hence, just as I may assert that Aaron will become a musician and you may ask whether he will become a musician, his piano teacher may promise that he will become a musician, and Aaron himself may apologize that he will become a musician. In this way, the same content is presented in various ways through different illocutionary forces.²⁰

It may initially seem that artworks have the same force types as speech acts. For example, Manet's *Olympia*, which depicts a prostitute reclining on a bed, to whom a black female servant brings flowers, caused quite a brouhaha when first shown in the Musée d'Orsay in 1865. While few appreciated the painting's significance at the time, it has since been identified as having numerous aims, e.g. *asserting* the hypocrisy of an art-going bourgeoisie, *questioning* the role of spectatorship in art, and *promising* or *predicting* the empowerment of women by likening a Parisian prostitute to Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. It may, of course, have been (and continue to be) doing all of this and more. Just as utterances can have more than one illocutionary force and content, e.g. 'Do you have a dollar?' may serve as a question *and* a request to be given a dollar, it may be suggested that an artwork like *Olympia* has various force types and contents, similar to those we use as speakers.

I do not deny that the ascription of illocutionary force types to artworks is tempting. But it is noteworthy that such ascriptions are rarely if ever genuine. The obvious problem is that many artworks do not assert, question or promise anything. When listening to Sibelius' *Second Symphony* or watching Merce Cunningham's *Beach Birds*, most of us do not recognize anything resembling a speech act. Of course, this has not stopped critics from ascribing them to artworks. In his review of Symphony San Jose's performance of Sibelius' *Second*, Scott MacClelland writes, "The opening movement *asserts*, then pulls back, accelerates then goes circumspect, alternates building

²⁰ York Gunther, 'What Art Could Be', *Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 26 (2016), p. 135f.

The Ineffable in Art

and relaxing as it retreats to chamber music before going fully symphonic”.²¹ And in response to *Beach Birds*, Laura Jacobs explains, “As only the cry of a gull in the air can do, the dance *questions* the meaning of life, the transience, the wind”.²² But it is apparent that these ascriptions are merely metaphorical. To be genuine, the speech act would have to meet certain conditions. For example, an utterance like ‘Doris is a dancer’ can be an assertion only if the speaker *believes* in the truth of the assertoric content and an utterance like ‘Do you have a dollar?’ can be a question only if the speaker *intends* the hearer to do something, viz. answer.

The problem is that artworks do not meet such conditions, which is apparent in two ways. First, an artwork’s subject-matter need not be something that the artist or performer needs to have the corresponding beliefs, intentions and so on about. For example, when painting *Ophelia*, Millais need not have believed that there was a maiden spurned by Hamlet who committed suicide. The same is, of course, true of verbal works such as novels, poems and plays. Like Millais, neither Shakespeare nor any actors who perform *Hamlet* have to believe (or have believed) that a lovely maiden named ‘Ophelia’ was actually driven to suicide by an indecisive Danish prince.²³ As Danto maintains, artworks are “dreamlike” in that “It is not necessary that they be true”.²⁴ And second, to insist that an artwork’s force should be fixed by the conscious mental states an artist has at the time of its creation is to assume some version of the Intentional Fallacy: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art”.²⁵ The implausibility of the view is perhaps most evident in cases where aleatory techniques are employed in the creation and/or performance of artworks, e.g. in the music of John Cage, the choreography of Merce Cunningham, and the painting of Jackson Pollock. But it is also generally true. For unlike genuine speech acts, artworks have a life of their own, independent of the conscious mental states of their creators and performers.

²¹ Scott MacClelland, ‘Shining Sibelius’, *Metroactive: Silicon Valley’s Weekly Newspaper* (March 6-12 issue, 2003) at <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/03.06.03/symphony-0310.html>. Accessed 17/9/2017. My emphasis.

²² Laura Jacobs, ‘Petipaw’, *The New Criterion*, vol. 20, no. 7 (March 2002) at <https://www.newcriterion.com/issues/2002/3/petipaw>. Accessed 17/9/2017. My emphasis.

²³ See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 70-105.

²⁴ Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 48. See also York Gunther, ‘What Art Could Be’, pp. 133-135.

²⁵ Munroe Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1946), p. 466.

The same considerations can be raised against the common assumption that artworks *express* emotions. Like other speech acts, expressive utterances presuppose an experience of emotion at the time of the utterance. For example, 'I apologize for coming late' is a genuine apology only if the speaker feels regret for coming late. To say that an artwork expresses sadness, anger or joy presupposes that the artist or perhaps the performer experiences these emotions. However, this need not be the case. A painter, composer, choreographer, sculptor, and so on, or for that matter a performer, need not experience sadness at the time they create or perform an artwork that is expressive of sadness.

If artworks generally do not have the same force types as speech acts, what kind of force do they have? As I hope is clear, to suggest that they do not have force is not plausible. For if artworks and the experiences they elicit are ineffable, then they must have content, and the fact that they have content presupposes that they embody or bear this content in *some way*, which is what their force involves. What I propose is that artworks and aesthetic experiences have a distinctive kind of force, which is unique to them. Like illocutionary forces, aesthetic force has a function (point). Yet, where an assertion commits the speaker to the truth of a content and a question requires that the speaker intends for the hearer to answer, an artwork and the experience it elicits have a function without a function. In other words, the *way* artworks and aesthetic experiences present their contents is as functionless or purposeless. In claiming this, I am not suggesting that artworks and aesthetic experiences lack a function—this would be equivalent to saying that they lack force. Rather, what I am suggesting is that there *is* a distinctive way in which aesthetic content is presented, viz. *as* functionless.

Aesthetic force, I suggest, is an essential property of all artworks, whether verbal or nonverbal. Their function without function helps to distinguish them from other content-bearing media, whether linguistic, mental or artificial. This is not to say that an artwork's force is transparent. One might not recognize the fact that the object before one has a function without function. But this just illustrates that aesthetic force is not a perceptual property—artworks need not wear their force on their sleeves. This, of course, is true of utterances as well, e.g. to recognize that 'Do you have a dollar?' is a request, we need to appeal to something external to it, viz. an intention. But the difference is that in the case of an artwork this non-perceptual, external component need not be fixed by the artist or performer's conscious mental states. Just what, then, might fix an object's aesthetic force? This will depend on the theory of art one endorses. For example, aesthetic force might be fixed external to the artwork by appealing to the artist's unconscious mental states,

The Ineffable in Art

the social conditions of the work's origin, the audience's experience of the work, the art community's reception of it, and so on. In the present context, it is not necessary to decide on any of these theoretical options.

Now, let us return to ineffability. The fact that artworks and aesthetic experiences have a distinctive kind of force does not yet explain their ineffability. Recall that an experience can be articulated (is effable) if its content can be borne by an indicative sentence or assertion. In the case of an artwork or aesthetic experience, its content would be articulated if it could be separated from its aesthetic force and reattached (so to speak) to an indicative sentence or assertion. Hence, the functionless presentation of content by artworks and aesthetic experiences alone does not explain the ineffability of their content. The additional assumption we need is that artworks and aesthetic experiences violate the force/content distinction.²⁶ Let me explain.

The force/content distinction states that content can be individuated independently of force—in other words, a change of force does not entail a change of content. The assumption, which is commonly made in linguistics and philosophy, enables us to account for communication and linguistic articulation. To recognize this, suppose for a moment that force were an indissoluble aspect of content. In such a case, if I were to assert that Doris is a dancer and you were to question that she is a dancer, my assertion and your question would not merely reflect differences in the *way* we said things, they would reflect differences in *what* we said. In addition to radically multiplying the number of contents you and I grasp, our very ability to disagree and, for that matter, to communicate would be undermined. Your questions and my assertions would not have the same contents. Moreover, and more to the point, if force were an indissoluble aspect of content, my own thoughts and utterances might themselves be out of synch. For example, if belief and assertion were taken to be different force types (I do not mean to suggest they are—but consider this for a moment), my belief that Aaron will become a musician and my assertion that he will become a musician would have different contents, suggesting that I could not in principle articulate what I think (or think what I say). In such a case, while I could use an assertion like 'I believe that Aaron is a musician' to *refer* to my belief, such an assertion would fail to *articulate* the content of the belief.

Although the contents of much of language and thought heed the force/content distinction, the contents of art and aesthetic experiences, I

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the force/content distinction, see York Gunther, *Essays on Nonconceptual Content* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), pp. 8-14 and pp. 279-288.

suggest, do not. Their force is an indissoluble aspect of their contents, which is to say that their force partially determines the kind of contents they have. This is why the contents of, say, *Olympia* cannot be articulated linguistically. To articulate the painting's content linguistically, one would have to separate it from its force and reattach it to an assertion. However, since the force of an artwork or aesthetic experience is an indissoluble aspect of its content, because a difference of force entails a difference of content, this cannot be done. And for this reason, we cannot assert or describe what *Olympia* is about. Of course, one could describe what the painting refers to, suggest what Manet's intentions as a painter were, or even ascribe metaphorical speech acts to it. But none of these constitutes an articulation of the painting's content.

It is worth emphasizing that both claims are required for the semantic account. On the one hand, claiming only that artworks and aesthetic experiences violate the force/content distinction is insufficient to explain ineffability. The problem is, if a nonverbal artwork had an assertoric force, its content would be presented in the same way as an assertion, suggesting that its content could be articulated by some assertion. On the other hand, claiming only that aesthetic force is functionless, leaves open the possibility that the aesthetic content could be separated from its aesthetic force and reattached to an assertion, again suggesting that it could be articulated. By advancing both claims, however, we seem to have ourselves an adequate account of ineffability.

The Account's Adequacy

Unlike psychological and metaphysical accounts, the semantic account can escape the aforementioned dilemma. Recall that psychological accounts lack the means to explain invariability, whereas metaphysical accounts unnecessarily appeal to entities whose existence is considered controversial. My account does neither. An artwork and aesthetic experience remains ineffable irrespective of differences in the vocabulary, concepts, memory, and so on, of individuals or communities. For despite such differences, aesthetic force remains functionless and an indissoluble aspect of aesthetic content. Thus, there would not be any variation in the degree to which an artwork or aesthetic experience is ineffable, suggesting that ineffability is non-relative.

But what of its indefeasible character? One might suppose that indefeasibility is not explained by the account since it does not rule out the possibility that an object or event might be at one point in time an artwork and at another a non-artwork. The fact that aesthetic force itself is fixed in some sense by human beings, whether individuals or communities (as well as the fact that it is an indissoluble aspect of aesthetic content), suggests the possibility

The Ineffable in Art

that human beings could withdraw their ‘endorsement’ of an object as an artwork. And if this were the case, it would suggest that the object (event) in question would no longer have aesthetic force (or violate the force/content distinction). And this, it might be supposed, would leave its content ‘vulnerable’ to articulation.

It is certainly true that the account does not rule out the possibility of such ontological changes. An object might well change its ontological status from being an artwork to being a non-artwork, or vice versa. However, this does not imply that the object *as* an artwork could have its content articulated if it became a non-artwork. For while an artwork, its status as an artwork partially determines the kind of content it has. That is, because as an artwork it has *aesthetic* force and as a non-artwork it does not, and because this force is an indissoluble aspect of its content, to change its ontological status from artwork to non-artwork would be to change its content. In this way, while the content of a non-artwork could be articulated, the content of the artwork *as* artwork could not, which is sufficient to explain the indefeasible character of ineffability.

The suggestion that an object could change its ontological status from a non-artwork to an artwork may be thought to raise a different problem. While the semantic account explains invariability, one might suppose that it does so only by appealing to a metaphysical conception of art. That is, it is only by positing aesthetic force, which seems to be a metaphysical property, that an account of invariability is possible. Such a concern, however, is misplaced. The fact that an object can become an artwork does not constitute a metaphysical inflation. Although *mere* objects can become artworks, their transformation does not involve appealing to any immaterial properties or an otherworldly realm. It is true that an object’s being an artwork depends on its having aesthetic force, which is a non-perceptual, external property. But, as I suggested earlier, aesthetic force might be determined in any number of ways (e.g. by an artist’s unconscious mental states, the social conditions of its origin, an audience’s experience of the work, the art community’s reception of it), none of which assumes the existence of controversial metaphysical entities.

The semantic account, it should be emphasized, does not presuppose the truth of the Isomorphic Representation Thesis either. Recall that the thesis claims that only media with the same logical structure can express an artwork’s content because the medium in question must have a logical structure that is isomorphic with the ontological structure of its reference. Such an assumption is not needed. The ineffability of artworks and aesthetic experiences has nothing to do with *what* they are about. Nor does it have anything to do with an aesthetic experience’s phenomenology. The reason that an artwork and

aesthetic experience are ineffable concerns their force and that fact that this force partially determines the kind of content an artwork has. In short, on the semantic account, ineffability *is* a property of intentionality.

Of course on this account, ineffability is a property of *any* aesthetic content, whether the artwork is verbal or nonverbal. In other words, the account applies to novels, poems and plays as well as to paintings, pieces of music and danceworks. The reason is that I have connected an account of ineffability closely to a characterization of art generally. While this deserves a more detailed discussion than I am prepared to give it here, one implication of this approach is that it meets the second as well as the first challenge. Recall that the proponent of aesthetic ineffability faces two challenges, viz. to account for the property of ineffability and to establish its instantiation by artworks and aesthetic experiences. Although I have explicitly undertaken the former, because my account closely connects ineffability with what an artwork is, I have established ineffability's instantiation. That is, if one assumes that there are artworks and that my partial characterization of them is correct, the instantiation of ineffability follows.

But what of significance? Well, in the case of a good artwork, our experience of the work can offer us a unique perspective (intentional content), which may reveal a "great truth of life" in a new light. Unlike Manet's *Olympia*, Sibelius' *Second Symphony*, Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* or Cunningham's *Beach Birds*, the everyday sights and sounds of red strawberries, creaking doors, jagged stones, and fluttering laundry do not give us experiential contents that do this. In fact, it might turn out that certain influential artworks, e.g. the ready-mades of Duchamp, might not do this either. (To determine whether they do requires a further investigation as it is outside of the purview of the present article.) But regardless of this, the semantic account does not explain ineffability in terms of fineness of grain, as Raffman does, and thus such a distinction can firmly be drawn between the two. It is also noteworthy that the significance of aesthetic experiences need not be explained hedonistically, as Scruton and Addis suggest. Our tendency to search out unique perspectives may have nothing to do with an obsession for acquiring new phenomenological states. Artworks and aesthetic experiences are, more often than not, about something other than phenomenology.

Conclusion

And where does this leave the art critic? The critic's role is, in effect, to relay the significance of an artwork or its experience in full knowledge of its ineffability. This she may undertake in any number of ways. She may mention the artist's conscious or unconscious intentions, the social conditions of the

The Ineffable in Art

work's origin, the difference between its reception then and now, and so on. With such explanations, it may be useful to regard artworks as pseudo-speech acts, in hopes of drawing some kind of parallel with the *way* a specific artwork or aesthetic experience presents its content and the *way* a genuine speech act does. Moreover, in attempting to specify the artwork's subject-matter, she may set out to fix as completely as possible its reference. Yet, if she recognizes her limitations as a critic, she will be ever-cognizant of the fact that the contents of her review and the artwork can at best form an unbridgeable Fregean puzzle. While co-referential, their contents as well as their aims will always differ. And we, as audiences and readers should appreciate that this is the best any critic can do, that nothing more can be expected. She, as our linguistic guide, can only lead us to the boundaries of language and leave us there, without a word, to experience art. Of course, this is what many admirers of art have known all along. And it is why they have chosen to become artists or to remain audience members rather than to fashion themselves as art critics.