

## Chapter 10

# CRITICAL REASONING AND CRITICAL PERCEPTION

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## TWO INSIGHTS

An old issue in aesthetics concerns the nature of critical debate. On one side are those who see critical discussion as a form of argument like any other. In defending a critical judgment, be it of nature or art, we appeal to what Kant (who rejected the idea) called ‘principles of taste.’ These are general claims to the effect that anything possessing some feature F thereby, or at least to that extent, possesses a different feature G, where this second feature is of aesthetic interest. We can then argue that the object under discussion is G on the basis of both this general principle and the claim that the object is F (Beardsley 1962, 1969; Dickie 2006). The opponents of this view have usually made two claims in response. They have denied that there are any principles of taste from which aesthetic conclusions could be informatively derived. But they have also made a positive claim about what critical debate involves, that its purpose is to bring one’s audience to see the object in a certain way. There are no critical arguments, if that means deductive reasoning from general claims, for no such claims are available. In any case, the point of critical discussion is not the formation of belief, but the engendering of perception (e.g. Isenberg 1949; Hampshire 1970; Strawson 1974; Sibley 2001*a*, 2001*b*; Mothersill 1984).

In my view, each side to this debate grasps an insight. The proper outcome of critical discussion is indeed a perception, and to that extent I condone the second position. But the first position also seeks to preserve a very appealing thought, namely that critical discussion is a rational activity – it

counts as a form of argument, or reasoning. No doubt the proponents of this view were mistaken to construe its rationality as deduction from general principles. But perhaps they were driven to do so because they could not see how otherwise to preserve the rational status of critical discourse. Certainly their opponents can do little to accommodate this status. As they construe matters, the heart of critical discussion is the activity of pointing out features of the object to one's audience, with a wider penumbra of other actions one might perform to convey one's point, such as making comparisons and contrasts, or appealing to metaphors. But pointing out is not reasoning; it does not take the listener from what she already accepts to a conclusion she doubts. Rather, it is to direct the attention of one's companion so that her experience reveals one of the object's features to her. And the other activities this view makes available to the critic, whatever their benefits, have even less claim to count as appeals to rational connections. Thus it is a serious question whether the advocates of critical perception can make sense of the idea of critical reasoning. For anyone sympathetic to both insights, it matters little whether there are 'principles of taste' sufficient to drive deductive arguments. The deeper issue is how to reconcile the rationality of critical discourse with its leading to perception. How can there be an argument with a perception as its conclusion?

Although much of the debate over principles of taste missed the fact that this is the issue at its core, at least some writers have addressed the problem. Frank Sibley, for one, sees the apparent tension. In "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic" his response is to abandon the first insight: "an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called *reasoning*" (2001a: 40). He then devotes the paper to saying what the activity of critical discussion could be, *given that* it could not be reasoning in the sense the first insight requires. He does so by exploring the relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic *properties*. Much of the debate over the possibility of critical reasons has taken the same line. My hope in what follows is to make progress where Sibley gives up. I explore the relations between the notions of perception and reason, leaving out of account any relations in the world which critical reasoning might exploit.

Roger Scruton, in *Art and Imagination*, clearly thinks he can hold on to both insights. He claims that knowledge of a piece of music may provide "reasons (and not just causes) for my hearing it in a certain way" (1974: 179). Later he is more explicit still: "There is such a thing as accepting a reason for an aesthetic experience; an aesthetic experience can feature as the conclusion of a ... syllogism" (1974: 244). (The omitted phrase is important; I will introduce it below.) Scruton attempts to accommodate these claims within a view on which aesthetic engagement involves something like aspect perception. As such, aesthetic experience is in part an exercise of