

Aesthetic Reasons

What are aesthetic reasons? How do they differ from other reasons? Do such reasons have an objective source? How weighty or authoritative can such reasons be?

Introducing aesthetic reasons

Aesthetic reasons are reasons to do and think various things.¹ It makes sense to wonder if a tree stump on the lawn was left there for environmental or for aesthetic reasons, or for no reason at all. Some philosophers, perhaps Nietzsche, seem to have thought that there might be aesthetic reasons to live a certain kind of life, even if moral norms are absent or vacuous.² Others, perhaps Hume, have thought that a certain kind of moral flaw in an artwork can be a pro tanto reason to think the worse of it aesthetically.³ Suppose that we choose a theory in physics in part because of the elegant explanations it offers. We might wonder whether such aesthetic considerations could offer any epistemic reason to think that we were thereby mirroring real objective structure.⁴

What makes such reasons aesthetic? Something to do with the relation they bear to experiences, artworks and other objects of aesthetic interest. Not any old relation will do, obviously. My reason for wanting you to pay more UK tax might be that I know that you inherited many costly artworks of great historical significance, and as a result enjoy luxurious tax breaks under the National Trust, while all the time you refuse to exhibit them publicly. What motivates me here may well be reasons of simple justice, and be in a sense indifferent to the fact that that the property that you own happens to be of significant aesthetic interest. It's difficult here, as elsewhere, to give a reductive account of the kind of relation that is the 'right kind' of relation. Perhaps it has something to do with the extent to which detailed facts about aesthetic objects and

¹ Or perhaps evidence that we ought to do and think these things. See (Kearns and Star 2008), (Broome 2013) Schroeder, this volume

² 'It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified', (*The Birth of Tragedy* 5); 'As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us' (*The Gay Science* 107); 'Life without music would be an error' (*The Twilight of the Idols* 'Maxims and Arrows' 33). See the chapters by Ridley and Gardner in (Gemes and Richardson 2013) for relevant discussion.

³ 'Where vicious manners are described, without being marked by the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper that I should, enter into such sentiments'. Hume 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757/1993: 152). See (Gaut 1998) and (Carroll 2000) for contemporary discussion.

⁴ "There is a tendency...for us to take simplicity...as a guide to metaphysical truth. Perhaps this tendency derives from earlier theological notions: we expect God to have created a beautiful universe" (Smart 1984: 121)

properties play an indispensable or constitutive role in accounting for such reasons. But if a philosopher maintains that there are no objective aesthetic reasons, or that aesthetic principles of theory choice do not raise probability of truth, we can generally catch on to the kind of thing that they might be thinking. We don't have to wait for a completed conceptual analysis to start making some progress on the normative theory.

Some preliminary distinctions

Let me say something about my point of departure. I'm going to assume that certain distinctions and theses are in good standing. Many of these are a matter of moderate controversy in philosophical aesthetics and normative theory. Nevertheless, I'll be assuming from here on in that the controversies can be resolved in a way that doesn't undermine my central lines of argument below.

- (1) I'll assume that there is distinction between aesthetic properties *narrowly* construed and *broadly* construed. Narrow aesthetic properties are objects of the external senses, as delivered to us in experience. The visually striking array of colours presented in an experience of a sunset provides an example of a narrow aesthetic property. Aesthetic qualities in the broad sense need not be perceptually presentable. They might include e.g. the elegance of a mathematical proof, the wittiness of a conceptual artwork, or the attractiveness of somebody's character. I'll assume that both kinds of properties can help generate aesthetic reasons. I'll remain officially neutral on whether narrow aesthetic properties presented in experience are always properties of represented aesthetic objects (so that experience is in a sense transparent, and not itself a medium that instantiates narrow aesthetic properties). See (Beardsley 1958) and (Beardsley 1962); (Dickie 1964) and (Dickie 1965); (Levinson 1996); (Shelley 2013)
- (2) I'll assume that normative reasons can both guide agents who are responsive to them, and help us evaluate the actions and states of such agents. (Dancy 2000), (Raz 2000)
- (3) I'll assume that at least some informed, pleasurable responses to experienced narrow aesthetic properties provide us with aesthetic reasons, and also that this is not the only source of such reasons. In particular, I'll assume that e.g. a wide array of considerations that we use to evaluate the success or failure of artworks count as aesthetic reasons (for example, that instantiating stunning draughtmanship can itself give us an aesthetic reason

to value a work, over and above the pleasing experience of the stunning draughtmanship). I'll assume that in both cases, responsiveness to the relevant reasons may require a lot of background knowledge, practice, cultural immersion, etc. See Walton (1970); (Budd 2008), Davies (2006), McGonigal (2010).

- (4) I'll assume that reasons can be aptly characterized as aesthetic in virtue of meeting a number of distinct conditions. For example (i) they are grounded in the final or ultimate value of some aesthetic property, as when the beauty of the redwoods give me a reason to appreciate or preserve them (ii) an aesthetic property plays the right role in the content of the reason, even though it is grounded in some non-aesthetic property, as when the value pleasure-in-general is thought to give me reason to landscape my garden in an aesthetically attractive way (iii) an aesthetic property mediates in the right way, even though neither the content of the reason or the final basis of the reason is aesthetic in character. For example, if I have a reason to pay my taxes in part because that is the only way to ensure that interesting artworks are appreciated, preserved or studied, and the value of such works is ultimately grounded in the value of rational accomplishment, then I will say that I have an aesthetic reason to pay my taxes. (Similarly, I can have a civic duty not to drive my car recklessly, even if neither the act of reckless car-driving nor the ultimate grounds of political obligation 'mention' nation states, laws, etc).

In general, I'll only talk of aesthetic reasons to value a given artwork when (i) the detail of its aesthetically relevant features play some significant role in explaining why we have such a reason (ii) possession of such features are in the standard case practically indispensable to us having such reasons and (iii) the kind of 'normative chain' linking our reasons with the works is normal and intended, not intuitively ad hoc, cooked up or otherwise non-generic.⁵ There is plenty more to be said here about how the above conditions should be supplemented and elaborated, but I'll assume that the general idea is clear enough to permit further discussion.

Distinctiveness and modesty

Aesthetic reasons are naturally contrasted with non-aesthetic reasons – moral or epistemic considerations, for example. Plato contrasts the motivating power of aesthetic beauty or fineness

⁵ In particular, I'll abstract away from the 'wrong kind of reasons debate'. See (Schroeder 2012); this volume ();

(kalon) with that of goodness (agathon).⁶ Hume (1757 [1993]) distinguishes the pleasurable approval that we enjoy when contemplating the moral virtues of others from the pleasurable approval that great works of art elicit in the best kinds of aesthetic sensibilities. Kant (1790 [1987]) argues that pleasure in free beauty has a different normative upshot than recognition of moral constraint, or the hedonic attractions of an agreeable experience. Nietzsche holds that affection for life can only be vindicated aesthetically, not in moral or epistemic terms, while Kierkegaard's pseudonymous narrators explore the attractions and shortcomings of taking such an aesthetic standpoint on existence, as opposed to adopting an ethical or religious worldview. (Kierkegaard 1843). Scanlon (2003) allows that we have reasons to value natural beauty and successful art as worthwhile 'in themselves', but locates these in a different practical sphere from the distinctive moral reasons we have to stand alongside other rational beings in relations of mutual accountability and respect. Philosophers of art squabble about whether an epistemic or ethical flaw in an artwork is eo ipso an aesthetic demerit. (Gaut 1998); (Carroll 2000); (Kieran 2006); (McGonigal 2010)

The idea that aesthetic reasons form a *distinctive*, sui generis class can be motivated in different ways. One is to reflect upon the analogies and differences between core examples of aesthetic reasons, and canonical cases of moral and epistemic reasons. Positive narrow aesthetic reasons draw upon a feeling of liking or pleasure, and in that way resemble certain reasons for action. But they also resemble an important class of basic epistemic reasons, in that they seem to be grounded in sensitivity to patterns present or presented in actual phenomenal experience.⁷ There is an internal connection between the experience of the startling redness of a sunset and acceptance of the perceptual belief that the sunset is startlingly red. An internal connection also seems to hold between the former and aesthetic appreciation of the startling redness of the sunset. The appreciation ought to be reliably sensitive to the features of the sunset as experienced. This seems to distinguish aesthetic reasons from the broader class of practical reasons, which may be in perfectly good order even as they are out of kilter with actual experience. Perhaps this is easiest to see in the case of certain 'purely sensational', highly abstract experiences, that don't seem as if they present an external world. In the absence of

⁶ See e.g. the *Hippias Major*, *Ion* and *Symposium*.

⁷ Aquinas correspondingly treats beauty as the object of a cognitive rather than an appetitive power. See e.g. *De Veritate* (1.1 and 21.1) and *Summa Theologiae* (1a 5.4 ad 1)

evidence of complicating factors, it seems fine to say: this experience in itself makes no moral claim on me; doesn't lend itself to moral evaluation or call me to moral action. It's far harder to imagine a case where one can say: this makes no epistemic or aesthetic claim on me. For example, a given such experience might provide reasons for both a belief about one's experience, and a positive aesthetic appraisal of it.

Even in the case of moral aims with a close tie to experience, the relationship seems different. Dabin's ongoing openness to the experiences of genuine love and friendship may itself contribute to his having lived a morally rich and admirable life, even as it remains unfulfilled. But his being open to aesthetically valuable experiences that never arrive does not in the same way contribute to his having lived an aesthetically rich and admirable life.

A second contrast between aesthetic and moral reasons springs from the idea that the authority of the former is somehow a more *modest* matter than recognition of the latter. Aesthetic reasons are often thought to impose less of an *external demand* upon us than moral and epistemic reasons. For example, many philosophers have held that we are entitled to respond with comparative equanimity to criticism of our aesthetic evaluations in a way that would be inappropriate in the epistemic and moral case. Moreover, philosophers who view 'external' moral claims with some suspicion, such as Williams and Nietzsche, seem happy to concede that aesthetic value may serve to constrain deliberation.⁸ To normative realists, this can seem unmotivated. After all, if there is something intrinsically puzzling about worldly entities that 'make a normative claim upon us', then why should some of them be thought to be less problematic than others? Isn't it the reason-giving relation *itself* which is *prima facie* strange, rather than its *relata*? But in any case, it seems as if it will be a good-making feature of a theory of aesthetic reasons that it can explain why intelligent people might have thought that they were both (a) distinctive and (b) modest in this way.

It's a substantive question whether aesthetic reasons are in fact distinctive and modest. A satisfying theory might aim only to explain the appearance of one or another feature, rather than vindicate it. In an influential overview, James Shelley (2013) suggests that "...for us the concepts aesthetic and moral tend to oppose one another such that a judgment's falling under one

⁸ Williams discussion of his fictionalized Gaugin case in his (1976) and (1995) is relevant here.

typically precludes its falling under the other". That might be true as a descriptive generalization about contemporary philosophers of art and beauty, but it would be a mistake to assign much theoretical weight to it. After all, many influential moral theories assign a central place to norms of practical reason, and aesthetic reasons look to be reasons to do various things, adopt various attitudes, and so on. Surely such moral theories need not, qua moral, ignore the practical reasons we have to create and respond to objects of aesthetic interest? As we might expect, we find the opposite when we come to look. For example, Joseph Raz denies that there is any important metaphysical or epistemic distinction between moral and non-moral considerations. (See Raz 1999: 3) Scanlon endorses a pluralism about morality, allowing that there is a perfectly good sense in which aesthetic reasons can morally exclude certain courses of action

The reason why it's wrong to bring about impersonally bad results, such as the destruction of the Grand Canyon, lie simply in the features that make them bad, such things as the fact that the grandeur and beauty of the canyon will be lost if it is destroyed.⁹

As Shelley himself notes, the eighteenth century thinkers of most interest to contemporary philosophy of art did not draw any hard and fast distinction between the reason-giving force of disinterested pleasure in aesthetics and in ethics. And any plausible Kantianism should allow that the norms of practical reason moderate and constrain our aesthetic projects and responses, just as with any other instance of our agency. For example, if no properly reason-responsive agent can sincerely will that people's most basic needs for sustenance and protection be disregarded, then it will be morally impermissible to resolve to spend all of one's time and resources reveling in the uncontested pleasures offered by fine meals and wondrous music.

Distinctiveness and modesty sit easily with anti-realist theories of aesthetic reasons, which characterise them as somehow non-cognitive or non-objective in nature. In the next three sections, I'll set out some of the motivations for such an anti-realist view. I'll then go on in the final sections to explore a strategy of realist response.

Motivating anti-realism: the security of aesthetic reasons

⁹ Scanlon (2003)

Philosophy concerns itself with the rational role of conscious perceptual experience. For example, lots of work in the philosophy of perception tries to explicate the justificatory relationships that hold between

- (i) a conscious phenomenal experience in which it visually appears to you that the sun is setting over the mountains
- (ii) your belief B1 that it looks to you as if the sun is setting over the mountains and
- (iii) your belief B2 that the sun is indeed setting over the mountains.¹⁰

We can ask analogous questions about the rational connections between experience and other states and activities. For example, we might think that a visual experience as of a child in danger of drowning, but admitting of easy rescue, rationally justifies you in helping the child from the water, feeling concerned about the child's welfare, etc.

Some of these rational relationships have been thought to help explain the distinctiveness of aesthetic reasons. Suppose that in the first case above, you received strong novel evidence that you were merely hallucinating a sunset. Plausibly, this should make a difference to what beliefs it is rational for you to hold. Perhaps you should continue to be just about as confident in B1, but much less confident in B2. Similarly, suppose that you received strong novel evidence that the child is not in any danger, but merely taking part in a movie scene. In that case, it seems plausible to think that you might be justified in abandoning your project of removing the child from the pond, merited in no longer feeling concerned, and so on. In both cases, the initial justificatory force provided by the experience seems to be undermined, weakened or defeated by the evidence that you were not connected up to your external environment in the way you had presupposed.

When it became evident that the child only appeared to be in danger, it doesn't seem reasonable to remain deeply concerned about the child's welfare. Contrast this with a case in which you respond to the visual experience as of the sunset with a feeling of pleasure, preference or liking. In this case, it may seem perfectly permissible to continue to take pleasure in the appearance as of a certain sunset even when you receive good evidence that your visual experience are not a reliable guide to the layout of your surroundings - for example, when you discover that the

¹⁰ Siegel and Silins (forthcoming) provide a useful overview

apparently vibrant colours of the sunset are the result of some kind of distorting medium. This is consistent with certain related states being defeated. (For example, perhaps you should abandon your presupposition that what you are taking pleasure in is the actual colour of a real sunset).¹¹

Similarly, consider the transition from a set of such experiences to the self-ascription ‘These appearances give me pleasure’, or even “I have the kind of sensibility that takes pleasure in these kinds of appearances”.¹² It seems as if such a transition could still be perfectly reasonable, whether or not reality matches appearance. More abstractly, the appearance of the sunset may provide rational support for claims like ‘The world can appear to me a certain way’, ‘My experience draws upon my conceptual capacities’, ‘The world contains at least this much order and harmony: it presents some coherent appearances’ or ‘I can know how things appear’.

This might be thought to provide a contrast between aesthetic reasons on the one hand and moral, practical and epistemic reasons on the other. We might think of the latter as *metaphysically committal*, in the sense that, if we are radically and incorrigibly wrong about external reality as a whole, then that impugns many of our central epistemic, moral and practical projects. If my beliefs are wildly false, then they don’t realize the values of truth, truth-conducive warrant or knowledge.¹³ If I’m not acting in the way that I think I am, in the circumstances that I take myself to be in, then I’m not responding to the moral and practical reasons I construe myself as considering. Similarly, suppose that the existence of moral reasons require something metaphysically substantive of the world that can’t be established either a priori or on the basis of mere appearance. Historically influential candidates might include, say: God, the Form of the Good, other people, libertarian free will, natural and non-natural moral properties. It would then seem to follow that a radical separation between appearance and reality will impose a radical cut-off between me and the moral reasons.

¹¹ Levinson (1996: 6) claims that pleasure in an object is aesthetic when it “derives from apprehension of and reflection on the object’s individual character and content, both for itself and in relation to the structural base on which it rests”. Somebody who holds this kind of view should presumably say that the object of my pleasure is different when I attend to features of my experience in cases of illusion or hallucination.

¹² Such a view might presuppose an anti-scepticism about our memory of the appearances. The essential point here is that it can remain consistent with scepticism about the external world. Such scepticism can ask how we could come to gain knowledge of external reality even granted perfect access to introspectively accessible facts, including past experiences.

¹³ They may still accord with some cognitive norms - norms of rational coherence, say. See Kolodny, this volume () for discussion.

At least some aesthetic reasons do not seem to be metaphysically committal in this way. (Siewert 1998: 310-320). Suppose that all sensory pleasure is to some extent valuable. Then (i) I seem to have reason to value the occurrence of my experience and (ii) my experience seems to justify my assertion that the world contains something of value, even if it is solely composed of appearances. Suppose that Mill is right to think that pleasures that stand in the right relation to our deliberative capacities and other ‘higher faculties’ are more valuable than those that do not (Mill 1861); (Brink 2008); (Crisp 1997). Then on the plausible assumption that active appreciation of some rich, complex aesthetic experiences can exercise our rational capacities in the right way, then these can provide distinctively compelling reasons. Suppose that we only have reason to value appearance-based pleasures if doing so is not ruled out in the right way by authoritative moral norms. Then on the plausible assumption that such valuing will not be ruled out by moral reasons that are non-existent or in principle inaccessible, I will be entitled to value aesthetically pleasurable experiences even if the appearance-reality gap cannot be closed. Suppose that being able to take active pleasure in the aesthetically fine is part of the Aristotelian good life.¹⁴ Then on the plausible assumption that appearances can knowably be aesthetically fine, my experience will make it reasonable for me to assure myself that life is not wholly bad, that I am not wholly unlike the virtuous person, etc.

Finally, to take one of the more complicated cases, suppose that Kant is right to think that there is a class of reasons that bind all relevant finite rational agents, regardless of the contingent aims and hedonic capacities that we have. Then, on the plausible assumptions that he also thinks that the relevant class of rational agents are constitutively things that (i) have experiences with contents, upon which they can freely and deliberatively employ their conceptual capacities, and (ii) ought to accept that there is something good about the fulfilment of the constitutive preconditions for rational agency,¹⁵ then it seems as if certain appearance-based reasons will have a categorical character. Seeing something unconditionally good about rational agency doesn’t cohere with indifference as to whether such active, conceptually exploratory experiences can occur. The final value of the rational agency of creatures like us is inseparable from the value of the constitutive preconditions for such rational agency being met, and merely being able

¹⁴ The fine is assigned a crucial explanatory role in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but is not itself explicated in detail. See Irwin (2007: 206-207) for discussion.

¹⁵ Or perhaps, their own rational agency

to engage such actively interpretable appearances gives us grounds to think that some of them are in fact met.¹⁶ Kantian agents ought to be pleased by the manifest presence of activity and thinkability in the sunset-experience, whatever variation they have in their rationally optional preferences and projects, and even if experience is no guide to reality.¹⁷

An important class of aesthetic reasons, then, might seem epistemically and metaphysically more *secure* than other types of reason. Epistemically, because recognition of such reasons can be grounded in knowledge of the appearances and other subjective states of consciousness, even if there is an epistemic gap between appearance and reality that cannot be closed. Metaphysically, because agents might still have such reasons in worlds that differ very radically from our own, in which many of the apparent grounds we have for belief and action are misleading, and in which many of the presuppositions of our actual practical and epistemic projects are unmet. And it isn't difficult to see why the security of aesthetic reasons might have made them seem attractive to anti-realists, who have historically been motivated by concern about the epistemic and metaphysical good-standing of such presuppositions.

Motivating anti-realism: aesthetic disagreement and the role of sensibility

The fact that a core set of aesthetic reasons seem to be grounded in subjective and potentially variable aesthetic responses offers a different form of support for anti-realism. In this case, it is an aspect of the *modesty* of aesthetic reasons that the anti-realist claims to be able to best explain.

Suppose that a theatre performance is staged in a claustrophobic room. We might wonder whether the decision to stage it there was made for aesthetic reasons, or for economic ones. And perhaps quite independently of that, we might appraise the difference the claustrophobic atmosphere made to the success of the performance. The way in which the play was staged might provide us with a reason to value the artwork as an artwork, the performance as a performance.

¹⁶ I here gloss over the difficulties associated with the connection between the value of rational agency and the value of its constitutive preconditions. See e.g. (Koldony and Brunero 2013), (Way 2012) for some recent discussion of the complications attending such 'transmission' of normative and evaluative standing.

¹⁷ Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is famously difficult to interpret in a way that is at once textually responsible, plausible and coherent. My discussion here isn't supposed to capture or be consistent with everything that Kant says, although I hope that the suggested position is recognizably Kantian in spirit.

It seems as if two directors or spectators might reasonably disagree about the aesthetic value of setting the performance in that room. One might feel that it provides an effective shorthand for the brooding, oppressive atmosphere of Elsinore. Another might feel that it makes the thing feel too much like a knife fight in a phone box. Such conflicting claims might survive normal forms of sincere, reflective critical appraisal. They might even be held by people who (i) agree with each other as to which dimensions of the play and the room are relevant to deciding the matter, and (ii) explicitly recognize that other aesthetic agents might quite reasonably come to a different normative judgement than they did.¹⁸ What might such disagreement amount to?

One familiar diagnosis locates the disagreement in a non-cognitive clash of attitudes. On this kind of view, consideration of whether the performance is best staged in room like this is not a robustly factual matter. One person may applaud the decision, and another decry it, but the sense in which both are reasonable positions to take is that both are sincerely expressing non-wholly-belief-like commitments, preferences or likings. (Hopkins 2001); (Hume 1757 [1993]); Todd (2004); (McGonigal 2006).

A second approach thinks of the permissibility of apparent disagreement about aesthetic reasons as signaling that we have to think about the ‘truths’ or ‘facts’ about such reasons on more minimal, metaphysically modest terms. Perhaps there is no real fact of the matter about such reasons, and that apparent claims to the contrary only express the belief that it’s pretense worthy that there are. Perhaps the norms that govern acceptance of such claims do not really commit us to worldly norms, but still provide enough discipline to render talk and thought about aesthetic reasons minimally cognitive and truth-apt (Wright 1992). Perhaps the facts are somehow *constituted*, rather than tracked, by the informed responses of communities of sentiment, and the parties belong to different such communities. Perhaps it is metaphysically determinate that one such reason exists, but indeterminate which, so that the parties ought to agree that nothing is at issue between them. (Williams 2008) Or perhaps thought and talk about aesthetic reasons is governed by a special non-classical logic, that differs from that employed in our best physical and mathematical theories, and that helps explain the reasonableness of the conflicting commitments in this case. (Margolis 1995)

¹⁸ Raz (2003) suggests that many such disagreements can be resolved by proper attention to genre. My discussion here presupposes that no such source of resolution is at hand.

A third strategy of response claims that the question of whether the claustrophobic setting provides aesthetic reason to value the work is one that can only be answered relative to an aesthetic sensibility. This might be because some relevant class of aesthetic reasons are reasons-for-people-with-sensibility-X, or because an answer to the question will only be correct-relative-to-a-sensibility, or because whether or not an answer is expressed is a sensibility-relative matter (MacFarlane 2005); (Egan 2010).

These traditional expressivist, minimalist and relativist approaches coincide strategically in the following sense: they treat the phenomenon of reasonable, irresoluble aesthetic disagreement as symptomatic of aesthetic modesty, and modesty as best explicable in anti-realist terms. And it is easy to see why normative realists about the aesthetic might be thought to be compelled to give an inept and implausible characterization of such cases. For example, it might seem as if realists would have to say that exactly one of the participants was right and the other wrong, and that their being so tracked a metaphysically robust fact, expressible in semantically robust terms. But doesn't that seem to attribute to the participants a lofty logico-metaphysical seriousness that fits badly with their explicit concession that another normative take upon the facts is reasonable?¹⁹ And doesn't it seem objectionably anthropocentric to think that reality could somehow constrain us to perform Hamlet in this room and not that? After all, it's surely incredible to think that such a fact could obtain and have its nature quite independently of distinctively human patterns of attention and amusement, historically constituted artistic traditions, genres and styles, etc.

The authority of aesthetic reasons

We can make sense of the idea that a novelist might alter his final chapter to make it read better rather than to make it sell better, or that a tree stump be left in a yard because of its pleasant looks rather than its effects on the ecosystem. We might wonder whether such aesthetic reasons exert any distinctive authority over the projects and priorities of reasonable people, in the way that, say, moral or prudential reasons have been thought to do. As philosophers, we might ask: can aesthetic reasons be categorical? Are aesthetic reasons weighty? Can aesthetic reasons be conclusive?

¹⁹ Or, alternatively, demand such a metaphysically heavyweight response from them?

It may be helpful to emphasize two preliminary points by way of ground-clearing. First, if an aesthetic reason to do X is distinctively authoritative, conclusive or binding, then I will say that we have an aesthetic duty to X. When we have a duty to X, it is not up to us whether or not we X. We act wrongly and impermissibly by not X-ing, in way that cannot be remedied simply by simple alteration of our preferences or choices. In this sense, my strongly desiring to go and see a given film, in the absence of relevant counter-motivations, will not thereby suffice for the existence of an aesthetic duty, even if this is the only reasonable way to act, given my preferences.

Second, as I noted above, I assume that it isn't helpful to type of duties solely in terms of their ultimate sources of rational authority or binding force. That seems to deliver the wrong results in other areas of normative theory. For Kantian political theorists, duties of citizenship are ultimately to be explained in terms of the nature and value of individual rational agency. It would be an overreaction to claim that, if true, this establishes that there is no interesting explanatory category of political duty. On the contrary, there remains room for a substantive and theoretically unified discussion of whether, say, there is a political duty to vote, or to favour compatriots in cases of need.

Perhaps it's the sense that aesthetic reasons are distinctively *modest* in character that leads theorists just to presuppose that we lack aesthetic duties in this sense. That response is explicable. After all, philosophers interested in art and the aesthetic have generally paid scant attention to the deontic concepts of duty and obligation, by means of which we give voice to the sense of authority in the moral case. Moreover, we seldom feel compelled to appeal to such concepts in conducting our ordinary aesthetic life. In contrasting moral and aesthetic discourse, Peter Railton goes as far as to take this as a datum to be explained:

[These] differences in moral and aesthetic evaluation help to explain what might otherwise be thought a puzzling feature of aesthetic evaluation, in contrast to moral or even prudential evaluation: the seeming absence of a category comparable to duty or obligation. (Railton 1998)

But to me, this looks to be a highly substantive issue. After all, it seems that a wide class of reasons that are grounded in the value of art and the aesthetic do speak to us with a binding

authority. For example, it seems very plausible to me that the distinctive reasons that we have to value art and beauty partly help explain the existence of the following kinds of duties:

1. Wilful destruction: Somebody buys an irreplaceable an important work, or encounters an area of unique outstanding natural beauty, and destroys it on a whim. I suggest that, prima facie, the agent has a binding duty not to destroy such things for such reasons.
2. Failure to preserve: Somebody could easily rescue a valuable work from certain destruction, but chooses not to do so, on the grounds that it would involve getting his feet slightly wet. I suggest that, prima facie, the agent has a binding duty to save the work, and that such a duty is not affected by the consideration that doing so would afford him slight discomfort.
3. Metropolitan Museum: Somebody can easily afford to pay an optional but invited museum entrance fee, where the amount is fixed in a just and virtuous way. The person regularly attends and benefits from such museums and art galleries, but never pays, because he would rather keep the money. I suggest that, prima facie, the agent has a duty to contribute in a fair way to the running costs of such institutions.
4. Mere testimony: An influential film critic writes a negative review of a film that he has not seen, which is wholly based on (previously reliable) testimony and e.g. prior knowledge of directorial style. Even though the review turns out to be accurate, I suggest that, prima facie, the critic had a role-based duty to have seen the film himself.
5. Imperfect duties: A city architect never pays any attention to aesthetics of the buildings he plans. I suggest that the architect is neglecting an imperfect duty – an ideal to be kept in view whenever possible in our choice of actions.²⁰

If it is a substantive issue whether there are aesthetic reasons that bind us authoritatively, and not a datum, then the matter should be should be settled by argument. And in fact, there are some plausible looking arguments to the effect that there are no distinctively authoritative aesthetic reasons in this sense. They seem to spring from central elements of the influential Kantian presentation of duty, and its relation to constitutive features of rational agency.

Motivating anti-realism: against aesthetic duty

In a representative passage, Kant writes

²⁰ Some related examples are discussed in (Eaton 2008)

Either a rational principle is already conceived as of itself the determining principle of the will, without regard to possible objects of desire (and therefore by the mere legislative form of the maxim), and in that case that principle is a practical a priori law; and pure reason is supposed to be practical of itself. The law in that case determines the will directly; the action conformed to is good in itself; a will whose maxim always conforms to this law is good absolutely in every respect, and is the supreme condition of all good. Or the maxim is consequent on a determining principle of desire which presupposes an object of pleasure or pain, something therefore that pleases or displeases; and the maxim of reason that we should pursue the former and avoid the latter determines our actions as good relatively to our inclinations, that is, good indirectly (i.e. relatively to a different end to which they are means), and in that case these maxims can never be called laws, but may be called rational practical precepts. The end itself, the pleasure that we seek, is in the latter case not a good but a welfare; not a concept of reason, but an empirical concept of an object of sensation; but the use of the means thereto, that is, the action, is nevertheless called good (because rational deliberation is required for it) not, however, good absolutely, but only relatively to our sensuous nature, with regard to its feelings of pleasure and displeasure; but the will whose maxim is affected thereby is not a pure will; this is directed only to that in which pure reason itself can be practical. (Kant 1788 [1996]: 182-183)

We can distinguish a number of relevant arguments against the possibility of aesthetic duty, which explicitly or implicitly appeal to such Kantian distinctions

The argument from non-universality

1. In the influential Kantian tradition, duties are grounded in what we can coherently will to be a universal law, or what a community of rational agents would agree upon unanimously.
2. But fundamental differences in aesthetic sensibility mean that normal aesthetic life is grounded in responses and appraisals that are faultlessly non-universal.
3. So aesthetic life does not have the kind of basis that could provide for aesthetic duty, as that notion is traditionally construed.

The argument from prerogative

1. Duty is grounded in rational principle, that has a call on us whatever our particular tastes and preferences might be.

2. Aesthetic life is ultimately grounded in variable, individual taste, inclination or prerogative – our aesthetic lives are, in an important sense, up to us.
3. So aesthetic life does not have the kind of basis that could provide for aesthetic duty.

The argument from own-interest

1. Duty tells us what we owe to one another as rational agents, independently of our own-interests.
2. Even if we were to deny that our aesthetic lives are (or ought to be) grounded in variable taste or sensibility, it would still be true that aesthetic life is an own-interested matter.
3. So aesthetic life does not have the kind of standing that could provide for aesthetic duty.

The argument from experiential engagement:

1. Duties are grounded on the constitutive ends of practical reason, which are identifiable a priori, without appeal to any ‘empirical concept of an object of sensation’.
2. The canonical epistemology of aesthetic value, on which aesthetic life depends, essentially demands experiential engagement with the aesthetic object.
3. So aesthetic life does not have the kind of basis that could provide for aesthetic duty.

These arguments are importantly interrelated, but distinct. Perhaps there are robust agent-relative duties, of a kind that allow us to address the argument from non-universality. Even if this were true, the other three arguments would retain their force. Similarly, there may be good arguments that establish that whether I have a given genetic predisposition to a given disease is in no sense up to me, but is still primarily an own-interested matter. Even if such argument helped finesse the argument from prerogative, it would not speak to the two final arguments against the possibility of aesthetic duty. The various considerations spring from a unified and influential picture of duty’s source, but do not stand and fall together.

It seems, then, that there is a range of powerful considerations that tell against the existence of authoritative aesthetic reasons – at least if those duties are apt to play the kind of theoretical role that influential deontological theories have required of them. And this combination of security, faultless disagreement and absence of binding authority might all be thought to invite, or at least play nicely with, an anti-realist view of aesthetic normativity.

But such a view is not compulsory. I'll now sketch a rival realist interpretation of the distinctiveness and modesty of aesthetic reasons. In the next section, I'll motivate and defend a realist treatment of aesthetic disagreement. I'll then explain how that realist view makes room for the possibility of aesthetic duty.

A realist view of aesthetic disagreement

Realists about aesthetic reasons should, I think, take the following view of aesthetic disagreement. In a wide variety of cases, one party will just be straightforwardly wrong. In cases of aesthetic goodwill, the wrongness may well be acknowledged – I thought that this shade of paint would work here but it doesn't. But cases like the agreeable disagreement about the aesthetic effects of the claustrophobic room upon the performance are also perfectly possible, need not imply that either party is doing something they shouldn't be doing, impartially considered, and are consistent with the truth of realism about aesthetic norms.

One such form of irreconcilable but faultless disagreement results from a moderate pluralism about aesthetic sensibility. This position subscribes to a certain *underdetermination* thesis about the layout of the realist's aesthetic reasons. This is the claim that a range of different aesthetic sensibilities are compatible with fully living up to the demands of such reasons. For example, suppose that there is aesthetic reason to value both jazz and classical music. It might be perfectly aesthetically permissible to cultivate the kind of sensibility that helps you fully appreciate the former, as long as you take due care to protect a space in which the latter can be enjoyed, or vice versa.^{21, 22} Aesthetic realists can agree that there are numerous richly fulfilling aesthetic lives that we might come to live, and that no particular such life is designated as uniquely worthwhile, aesthetically responsible, or fulfilling.

But even though there may be no sensibility that we are obliged to cultivate, it might be the case that, once a suitable aesthetic personality *has* developed, the agent can come to be bound by reasons that relate to it. As Raz (2000: 74) notes in a related discussion, it is

²¹ This latter demand may require more of agents than might first appear. For example, allowing yourself to remain ignorant of the aesthetic goods provided by arts and nature might place you in a position where you find it difficult to see why you should help protect them via taxation, etc. Due care may require you to avoid such a situation.

²² I don't mean to suggest that the acquisition of a sensibility is a wholly voluntary, intentional matter. It will certainly depend upon broader, unchosen cultural, genetic and accidental elements.

primarily where matters are underdetermined by reason that we reveal and mould our distinctive individuality, or tastes, or imagination, our sociability, and many of our other, including our moral, characteristics.

The existence and distinctive nature of our aesthetic character is part of what constitutes us as people. But asking people to think and act in ways that are alien to otherwise permissible, partially constitutive aspects of their personality fails to give due weight to their integrity, need for self-respect, autonomy and self-understanding. Perhaps in the kind of case discussed it would be overstating the case to claim that ‘people do violence to themselves’ in surrendering or going against inclinations of their aesthetic sensibility.²³ But it does look like it would be an impermissibly intrusive demand on an otherwise sincere and committed agent, were we to insist that they defer to the aesthetic preferences of others - or even suspend judgement on the issue - whenever intractable differences arose.²⁴

This kind of view of intractable, sincere aesthetic disagreement is compatible with aesthetic norms being robustly real and objective. After all, the treatment only required that the norms fail to determine a uniquely permissible sensibility, given the normal conditions of human life, and why should the realist disagree with that?

A worry for the response

Perhaps it will be felt that there is something of a bait and switch going on. After all, the reasons we have to respect integrity, self-respect, autonomy, and so on are often thought of moral reasons. Doesn't this mean that the explanation that we gave of each parties' entitlement to their aesthetic opinion in the light of the details of the performance will be partly moral? But that might be thought to either give up on the distinctiveness of aesthetic reason, or at least to break the explanatory connection between fact and judgement that is characteristic of a realist worldview. The realist strategy above is to suggest that, looked at independently of sensibility, there are multiple ways in which it would be fine to stage the play, In the light of our particular

²³ Raz employs that phrase in a discussion of the connection between integrity and morally significant decision, prompted by Winch's remarks on *Billy Budd*.

²⁴ Constraints of space have led me to focus on the case of integrity here. But many other normative considerations provide for related realist strategies. See (Scanlon 1998) on the normative significance of tradition and social practice; (Johnson 2011) on obligations toward self-improvement; (Taylor 2013) on the normative significance of convention; (Greco 2010) on the normative weight of achievement or accomplishment; etc.

sensibility, however, we are entitled to maintain our evaluative take on the staging of the play. But the entitlement seemed to spring from considerations relating to integrity and the like, and not the aesthetic reason to which we see ourselves responding.

Here is one way in which the worry might be pressed in detail. To fix on a target, I'll assume that it is natural on independent grounds for normative realists to prefer 'agent neutral' rather than 'agent-relational' treatments of the most fundamental form of reason relation (Schroeder 2007). After all, that is one way in which realists might seek to distance themselves from rival variants of relativism. Rather than thinking that the basic aesthetic reason relation has as a relata a suitably placed agent

(A-R) The fact that the play was staged in a claustrophobically small room is reason for Sally to think ill of the play

the realist should think of it as non-agent-involving

(N-R) The fact that the play was staged in a claustrophobically small room is reason to think ill of the play²⁵

I'll assume further that realism about aesthetic reasons fits best with the view that the normative authority of aesthetic reasons is not 'generated' by or grounded in aesthetic preferences or sensibilities. After all, that is what distinguishes the realist from rival subjectivist versions of minimalism. Moreover, many extant realists hold that some aesthetic sensibilities are better than others, and some might even be impermissibly crude. That suggests that it may be advisable for realists to embrace 'wide-scope' readings of relevant normative principles (Broome 2007); (Broome 2013); Dancy (2000); (Schroeder 2004); (Kolodny 2005). For example, the realist may be unwise to embrace

(N-S) If you have an aesthetic sensibility S and you are going to engage in aesthetic activity then you have good reason to engage in S-related such activity

rather than

²⁵ These examples are intended to highlight the structure of the relevant relation, and not to commit the realist to a particular view of the relata.

(W-S) There is good reason not to jointly (have an aesthetic sensibility S and engage in aesthetic activity and not engage in S-related such activity)²⁶

The former principle sits naturally with a view on which (i) the existence of the sensibility is part of what generates the aesthetic reason and (ii) aesthetic sensibilities are equally capable of generating aesthetic reasons. The latter allows the realist to distance themselves from both claims.

Suppose that an aesthetic realism appeals to polished versions of principles like (W-S), that characterize our aesthetic reasons in an agent-neutral, wide-scope way. The ‘bait and switch’ worry might then be pressed as follows. It may be true, the objector concedes, that certain ‘impersonal’, sensibility independent aesthetic reasons exist. But it is common ground that those do not settle the question of whether the staging of the play provides aesthetic reason to think well of it. That is, nothing like the following is true:

(Staging) There’s good aesthetic sensibility-independent reason not to both (retain the other aspects of the performance and alter the room in which it is staged)

What we have instead is a defense of each party’s right to their aesthetic opinion that appeals to something like the following principle

(Integrity) There’s good reason not to jointly (have a permissible aesthetic sensibility that helps constitute who one is, and not be guided by it on relevant aesthetic matters)

Now even if we allowed that

(Cultivation) There’s good aesthetic reason to (have a permissible aesthetic sensibility that helps constitute who one is)

We could only see the rational authority of the reasons in (Integrity) and (Cultivation) as transmitting to

(Guidance) There’s good aesthetic reason to be guided by such a sensibility on relevant aesthetic matters

²⁶ For reasons of exposition, I’ve chosen oversimplified examples of such principles.

and thereby to e.g.

(Local) Sally has good aesthetic reason to hold that the claustrophobic staging improved the play.

if the reason identified in (Integrity) is itself an aesthetic reason. But that is what the imagined objector denies.

I think that the realist has a number of reasonable lines of response to this challenge. First, they can justly claim to have answered the initial line of attack, which claimed that they were committed either to (i) exactly one of the participants' being right about the layout of metaphysically robust aesthetic reasons or (ii) the aesthetic discussion being such that each should withdraw their claims, on pain of being unreasonable. The view under discussion allows them defensive space in which to deny the first disjunct without having to accept the second.

Second, the aesthetic realist is likely to think that agents ought to give due weight to the demands of objective aesthetic values. But they should stress that what respecting such value amounts to can be sensitive to the broader situation that we find ourselves in. An analogy: suppose that (1) we are morally obliged to precisify our extant conception of moral personhood or moral interests, to deal adequately with difficult cases, but (2) there are a range of morally permissible improvements. (On one specification, certain specified groups – jellyfish, say, or cockroaches - have moral interests, but on the other, they don't). Having reflectively established to the best of our ability that extension to the wider notion fits best with our moral principles, we may be morally bound to take those interests into account, and to demand that others do too, even though they may have sincerely come to the opposite conclusion. In a similar way, the realist may hold, respect for aesthetic value may require different things of us once we have developed a sensibility that we were not previously compelled to cultivate.

Consider the most entrenched kind of aesthetic disagreement. Suppose that Duke and Ella have created many successful musical works together, and have a rich understanding of the genre and tradition in which they work. They are working on a new piece that is important to both of them. Duke thinks that lighthearted quality of some of the singing style completely frustrates the ability of the piece to provide a richly moving tonal parallel to a given aspect of their shared cultural history. Ella disagrees. They can't find a way to reconcile their views, despite their sincere best

efforts to jointly reflect upon and elaborate them. Neither can find fault in the developmental history by which each came to cultivate their aesthetic character. And yet: for Duke, the singing ruins the piece, and for Ella, it doesn't. Duke's objection need not be that the singing ruins-it-for-Duke, nor that having to put his name to a work he doesn't like would be unduly-costly-to-his-integrity. There are lots of works which Duke finds himself incapable of enjoying, and yet he can in a sense see that others permissibly do. This case is different, says the realist. Through no aesthetic fault of his own, Duke just can't find aesthetic merit in the work in its current form. Since it is rightly important to him that the work possess such merit, given the demands of objective aesthetic value, he is understandably distanced from it. It would be an imposition on him, and an insult to his autonomy as an artist if he were to be forced to act as if the flaw he finds in the work isn't there. It's being an imposition isn't independent of the reason-giving force of aesthetic value. It's an imposition precisely because we are not allowing Duke to respond adequately to what he takes those very aesthetic reasons to be. It's partly because great artworks are good that it is good that people be allowed to make sincere attempts to create great art. The realist should claim, then, that objective aesthetic value is part of what explains why artists and audiences should be allowed to act with integrity.

A third strategy of response for the realist is to defend the idea that a version of the wide-scope norm expressed in (Integrity) can be motivated by aesthetic considerations alone. A very old idea in philosophy is that a reason-governed way of life provides a form of inner harmony, unity, narrative intelligibility, pleasing order, etc. If the realist can develop this line in plausible directions – and I think that it can be made to sound much more attractive than you might have thought – then they have a straightforward answer to the challenge. But I won't try to develop that case in detail.

Rather, we'll focus on a final style of response that the realist can pursue. This is to reject the 'typing' of reasons that the objection seems to rely upon.

Aesthetic reasons and the subsumption account

Suppose that you are a realist about epistemic, moral and aesthetic reasons. Here is a view of the relationship between the three categories that can seem seductive. The reasons are intimately tied up with the existence of different domains of value. There are three Values-With-A-Capital-

V: Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Truth constrains epistemic agency, goodness constrains practical agency, and beauty constrains – what? The appearances of things, or their form, or experiences of them, or experience-based appraisals, or aesthetic sensibilities or artworks or something. In any case, there are three cardinal Values and never the thrain shall meet.²⁷

Realists don't have to think this way, and I think that things go easier for them if they don't. Here is another approach that they might take. There are some highly abstract and general agent-neutral reasons. For example

- There's reason to value happiness²⁸
- There's reason to value rational accomplishments

Many different normative theories can agree that some such reasons exist. For example, it seems as if Platonists, Aristotelians, Kantians and Millians can all agree that some such principles are true, although they might quibble about how to understand such claims, which is more fundamental, etc. Realist versions of such theories should claim that these reasons exist objectively. In particular, while they can agree that well-placed rational agents will accept the authority of such reasons, they ought to deny that their status as reasons is constituted by such acceptance.

One role of reasons is to provide guidance to individual rational agents, and another is to allow us to appraise their activity. But these very abstract and unspecific reasons don't seem to help us do either. Roger isn't planning to go to the movies tonight. Is there anything wrong with that? Glasgow School of Art suffered from a major fire. Should I be especially concerned? The abstract agent-neutral reasons outlined above don't seem able to provide enough detailed guidance to tell us what particular agents should be doing and why. And that makes them look as if they can't be playing the role of reasons after all.

Realists should therefore embrace a two-component model of guidance by reasons. The objective authority of reasons springs in part from the objective existence of the kinds of ultimate reasons described above. But such reasons will only provide specific guidance and normative

²⁷ This kind of view dates back at least to Plato. See (Aertsen 1996) for a careful treatment of Aquinas' influential view of the topic, and its connection with a broader metaphysical realism.

²⁸ Or perhaps: rationally moderated happiness, designated forms of 'genuine' happiness, etc.

explanation when conjoined with particularizing information, that help explain why specific obligations and considerations apply here and not there. This information will bridge the gap between the abstract, agent-neutral reasons and more specific, agent-relational reasons.

Schroeder describes one way in which such a view might be thought to relate the foundational agent-neutral reasons and the derivative agent-relational reasons.

[In this way] we subsume agent-relational reasons under agent-neutral reasons. There is an agent-relational reason for you to do something, when it is a way of doing something that there is an agent-neutral reason to do. So, for example, there may be an agent-neutral reason to eat healthily. But what it takes to eat healthily may differ from agent to agent. Diabetics and Atkins dieters need to eat in different ways from the rest of us, in order to eat healthily. So it follows from [the suggested account] there is an agent-relational reason for Diabetics to eat in ways that there is no agent-relational reason for Atkins dieters to eat, and vice-versa (Schroeder 2007: 293-294)

On Schroeder's developed account, what it takes for R to be an agent-relational reason for X to do A is that there exists an s, b such that

(Subsumption) s is an agent-neutral reason to do b & A-ing is a way for X to do b & R is the conjunction of s with each truth that figures essentially in explaining why A-ing is a way for X to do b

The realist about aesthetic reasons ought to take a similar approach. It can be true that those who can and do take pleasure in jazz have a special reason to appreciate it experientially, without it being the case that (i) every other rational agent is equally bound to value it in the same way (ii) every aesthetic sensibility is as good as any other or (iii) the foundational authority of aesthetic reasons is in any way a relativistic, anthropological or mind-dependent matter. The normativity of such a reason can be grounded in an agent-neutral reason that doesn't mention auditory experience, the contingent course of music history or the local preferences of a subset of homo sapiens. The normative guidance it provides to specific individuals can be generated by the conjoining of such a grounding reason with additional particularising information.

The subsumption approach to aesthetic reasons allows the realist to respond to the detailed challenge to the validity of the integrity-based defense. They should say that in both

(Integrity) There's good reason not to jointly (have a permissible aesthetic sensibility that helps constitute who one is, and not be guided by it on relevant aesthetic matters)

(Cultivation) There's good reason to (have a permissible aesthetic sensibility that helps constitute who one is)

the reason that is claimed to exist is a highly abstract and general agent-neutral reason. ('There's reason to value rational accomplishments', say). So there's no fallacy here, and the force of the reason can defensibly be thought to transfer to the claim that we should be guided by our aesthetic sensibilities. The explanation of why having permissible aesthetic sensibilities is a way in which creatures like us can aptly value rational accomplishments will remove one level of abstraction.. But this will be understood as being tacitly packed into the *content* of the reason, rather than qualifying the *type*. The explanation of why, say, Sally but not Jake has an agent-relational reason of the kind described in

(Local) Sally has good aesthetic reason to hold that the claustrophobic staging improved the play.

will involve another addition of particularizing detail. This will appeal to the different truths about their particular sensibilities that are conjoined with the shared agent neutral reason, in roughly the way that Schroeder's (Subsumption) principle describes. But in each case, we are adding more truths that help explain the subsumed ways, rather than postulating new kinds of subsuming reasons.

This approach has many attractive features. It allows a straightforward cognitivism about aesthetic discourse, while allowing for sustained, sensibility-driven disagreement. It helps explain the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. And it helps us when we come to reflect upon the weightiness of aesthetic reasons.

The possibility of aesthetic duty

Suppose some form of realism about aesthetic reasons has been established. That doesn't seem to immediately commit us to a position on their binding force. Theories such as Railton (1998) and Gaut (2007) defend a form of realism about the value of art, and yet they deny that there is

an interesting class of aesthetic duties.²⁹ But can an independently motivated realist position at least make room for the possibility of such aesthetic obligations?

The issues here are complex, and demand a more thorough treatment. But it should be clear that the kind of ‘dual-factor’ aesthetic realism that I set out in the last section is well placed to address the arguments that seemed to count against that possibility. The strategy in each case is very similar. The realist concedes the truth of the first premise, but only when interpreted as appealing to relationships between agents and ultimate values. For example, a plausible case can be made that it is *prima facie* impermissible for Kantian agents to disregard the fact that something is a rational accomplishment.³⁰ Such a consideration will play the role of a universal law, that calls on us independently of our particular tastes and preferences, is owed as a result of the dignity of the rational will, and so on. The realist will also concede versions of the second premise of each argument that are compatible with their playing a ‘specifying role.’ That is, the realist should see the claims about the variability of sensibility, the close connection between narrow aesthetic reasons and experience, etc, as helping ‘fill in’ the final two conjuncts of some of Schroeder’s schema

(Subsumption) For R to be an agent-relational reason for X to do A is that there exists an s, b such that b is an agent-neutral reason to do b & A-ing is a way for X to do b & R is the conjunction of s with each truth that figures essentially in explaining why A-ing is a way for X to do b

Whether or not respecting rational accomplishment in cases like (Metropolitan Museum) requires that you pay an entrance fee depends not only on whether you have enough money, but also on whether the institution is an essential means of protecting something that we have reason to value. We can reasonably expect that a satisfying explanation of this latter condition’s being met will make essential mention of the detailed nature and cultural significance of artistic achievement, and the central role that aesthetic pleasures play in human life. The binding force of the agent-neutral reason will devolve to us only in a way that makes ineliminable and non-

²⁹ Railton (); Gaut ()

³⁰ Herman

gerrymandered mention of aesthetic properties and rewards. And that's all that's required, says the realist, for our duty to be aptly characterized as aesthetic.³¹

If some such view can be made precise and defensible, then aesthetic realists can offer their own diagnosis of the distinctiveness and modesty of aesthetic reasons. They form a unified class because of the essential role that aesthetic properties and responses play in particularizing general agent-neutral reasons. They are modest, in the sense that they can be generated by mere appearance, but that is because the agent-neutral reasons bind us even if there is a wild mismatch between appearance and reality. Some may be conditional on our having cultivated a particular aesthetic sensitivity, but that is compatible with them having an authoritative, binding force.

I don't mean to suggest that such a form of realism is likely to be dialectically effective against its opponents. As often occurs, the realist finds themselves making essential explanatory appeal to the very thing that the anti-realist was trying to do without. Bernard Williams finds in Nietzsche a general attitude that can be 'a great help'

...to the question 'how much should our accounts of distinctively moral activity add to our accounts of other human activity' it replies 'as little as possible', and the more that some moral understanding of human beings seems to call on materials that specially serve the purposes of morality – certain conceptions of the will, for instance - the more reason we have to ask whether there may be an illuminating account that rests only on conceptions that we use anyway elsewhere (Williams 1995: 68)

Many philosophers who have wished to appeal to the modest normativity of aesthetic reason have no doubt had this kind of methodology in mind. We should expect them to remain dissatisfied the above suggestions of how a more realist view of the matter might be developed.

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³¹ Compare: civic duty, duties of friendship, promissory obligation, etc.

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