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Aesthetic Properties as Powers

NOTE:

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Abstract

Realist positions about aesthetic properties are few and far between, though sometimes developed by analogy to realism about secondary properties such as colours. By contrast, I advance a novel realist position about aesthetic properties, which is based on a disanalogy between aesthetic properties and colours. Whereas colours are usually perceived as relatively steady features of external objects, aesthetic properties are perceived as unsteady properties: as powers that objects have to cause a certain experience in the observer. Following on from this observation, I develop a realist account of aesthetic properties as causally efficient powers. Beauty is not merely in the mind of the observer; it is a power of an object to bring about a certain effect, as much instantiated in the object as its fragility or poisonousness. To show how such a view can be made ontologically respectable, I draw on recent ‘dispositionalist’ accounts of powers in philosophical metaphysics. I then offer two arguments in favour of this view. First, the view matches the phenomenology of aesthetic judgement. Second, the view offers an explanation of how it is that critics can demand agreement with their aesthetic judgements.

1 Aesthetic Properties

Consider the following properties: beautiful, dreamy, cute, sombre, lovely, dreadful, ugly, astounding, drab, elegant. What aesthetic properties such as these have in common is hard to define: they are often mentioned in critical discourse about art, though we also describe natural scenes, people, animals, and even scientific theories as having them.² However we define the scope of the aesthetic, though, it has long been felt that such properties are rather curious. On the one hand, when we attribute an aesthetic property to an object, we seem to be merely saying how the object makes us feel. Praising a painting as dreamy, we seem to say that it makes us feel elated and lost in thought. And yet ascriptions of aesthetic properties are also ruled by palpable standards of correctness. To say that a funeral is cute or that Knut the Polar Bear is sombre would clearly miss the mark (Figure 1). In this paper, I will argue that developing a proper ontology of aesthetic properties is the key to elucidating this curious situation. The question we should ask is as follows: Do aesthetic properties exist, and if so, what kind of properties are they?



Figure 1.

Knut the Polar Bear (2007). © Jens Koßmagk (Creative Commons license: CC-by-sa-2.0-de)

I will call the dominant way in which this question has been answered ‘non-realism about aesthetic properties’, but it has also been called subjectivism, expressivism, response-dependence theory, quasi-realism, and experientialism by various proponents.³ The starting point of these accounts is a view on what happens in the *paradigm* case of aesthetic judgement, that is, what happens when we ascribe an aesthetic property to an object *on the basis of direct perceptual acquaintance* with the object.⁴ Even though the subject–predicate structure of aesthetic judgements may make it seem like we are describing some mind-independent property of an object (‘*x* is cute’ seems a lot like ‘*x* is transparent’), what really occurs, on the non-realist construal, is that we are describing our response. For example, when we say that Knut is cute, we are typically pointing to the feeling of sympathy that the little bear prompts in us. Taking this as a starting point, the nature of aesthetic properties may be thought of as follows:

Non-realism: Attributions of aesthetic properties are characteristically reducible to reports of experiences in the mind of the observer. Therefore, objects in the external world do not possess aesthetic properties.

By ‘objects in the external world’ I simply mean objects that are not purely objects of thought: bears, tables, pictures, and so on. Since non-realists do not take external objects to possess aesthetic properties, it is unsurprising that some are also what we might call *eliminativists*: they take aesthetic properties to not *exist* and prefer to talk about the normativity of our aesthetic *concepts* (cf. Matravers 2005, pp. 191–195). Other non-realists, however, might take aesthetic properties to exist in some ‘thin’, ‘response-dependent’, or ‘quasi-realist’ sense, so that their instantiation is fully derivative from the observer’s response (cf. Goldman 1995, p. 21 ff.). More on these subtle differences later. For now, the ontological sentiment that I take to be expressed by non-realism is that, when it comes to aesthetic properties, the response of the observer is where ‘the action is’. As Hume put it, ‘Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them’ (Hume 1998a, p. 136).

Against this view, the realist position holds that

Realism: Objects in the external world possess aesthetic properties. Attributions of aesthetic properties are not reducible to reports of experiences in the mind of the observer.

The idea here, then, is that our response to Knut tracks his cuteness, rather than that his cuteness consists in our response to him. Cuteness is a property possessed by Knut himself, in a fully fledged, ‘non-quasi’ sense. It is to be counted amongst Knut's mass, hirsuteness, and opacity.

By and large, ontological realism about aesthetic properties has been viewed as a non-starter. Instead, the debate has focussed on the so-called antinomy of taste: *given* non-realism about aesthetic properties, can we secure some standard of correctness for aesthetic judgement?⁵ Few have gone against this trend. Michael Watkins and James Shelley attack aesthetic non-realism, but do not offer a realist view of their own (Watkins and Shelley 2012).⁶ Jerrold Levinson, on the other hand, has presented a positive realist view that is analogous to ‘primitivism’ about colours (Levinson 2005).⁷ Levinson takes ‘ways of appearing’, like colours and textures, to be ‘ways of being’, and then argues that aesthetic properties are ‘subtle and synthetic’ emergent gestalts of such simpler ways of appearing. This view seems suited to aesthetic *formal* qualities such as ‘balance’: if colours are real properties, then a balanced arrangement of colours may be as well. As Levinson acknowledges, however, it is not clear that his view can account for emotionally laden aesthetic properties, such as cuteness, dreadfulness, or sombreness (Levinson 2005, pp. 211, 218–219, 223–226).

In what follows, I will attempt to develop a novel realist position that covers emotionally laden aesthetic properties like cuteness. Given the dearth of realist accounts, I will measure my new account against non-realism and limit my discussion of Levinson's alternative realist position to the footnotes. Since I try to develop a substantial new position in this paper, I should note at the outset that there are some controversial commitments that I will not be able to wholly resolve. This is the result of my making use of an important but controversial view about dispositional properties, recently developed in metaphysics, which allows us to think of properties as causally effective powers. While those who find such ‘dispositionalist’ metaphysics unpalatable for whatever independent reasons might remain unconvinced by the theory of aesthetic properties I develop, I hope to convince them that there is at least a fruitful dialogue to be had between aesthetics and metaphysics. For those who are in principle open to such a view, however, I hope to show how it can furnish an attractive new position in philosophical aesthetics.

In the next section, I outline the methodology that I think the non-realist and the realist should equally accept for settling the question of the nature of aesthetic properties. In Section 3 I motivate my preferred view by drawing a new comparison between our experience of aesthetic properties and of colours, and in Section 4 I finally develop my realist ontology by reference to dispositionalism. In Sections 5 and 6, I then offer two arguments in favour of my preferred view by means of showing what my ontology helps us to explain: the argument in Section 5 bears on the phenomenology of aesthetic judgement, and the argument in Section 6 on its standard of correctness. Therefore, while most of the paper concerns the connection between the ontology of aesthetic properties and the experience of aesthetic judgement, readers interested primarily in issues such as agreement between critics will want to pay special attention to Section 6. In Section 7, I return to the issue of methodology and reflect on what has been achieved.

2 Methodology

Because the debate in aesthetics has focused on the standard of correctness about aesthetic judgement rather than on ontology of aesthetic properties, there is little consensus on what a good methodology would be for helping us decide the ontological issue. Before I advance my view, let me therefore make some methodological remarks.

First of all, we should distinguish between what we might call fundamental and non-fundamental properties. I will use the following rough distinction. Fundamental properties are those that will feature in our final physical theory. Non-fundamental properties are those that belong to our ‘manifest

image', that is, the way in which we, as the kinds of beings that we are, make sense of our world.⁸ Aesthetic properties probably do not exist on the fundamental level conceived of in this way, and they probably share this fate with colours, chairs and tables, governments, emotions, and persons. The question is what conclusions we should draw from this. On the one hand, we may think that the only legitimate ontological inquiry is that which clarifies what goes on at the fundamental level. Ontology, on this view, should only concern itself with the nature of those entities that will be mentioned by physicists when they (eventually) develop their final theory. Alternatively, we may think that it is also meaningful to formulate an ontology that helps us make sense of non-fundamental properties. Such an ontology, to follow Mark Johnston's suggestion, should help us reconcile our conflicted pre-theoretical beliefs in a particular area.⁹ Johnston's seminal paper, on which I base this suggestion, is about colours, but the point can be made more generally: we have muddled, conflicting beliefs about colours, persons, governments, emotions, everyday medium-sized objects, aesthetic properties, and so on. A good ontology of each of these will bring the relevant beliefs more closely into sync with one another. I will presuppose that this is a valid project.

So what are our conflicted beliefs in the case of aesthetic properties? These beliefs, I propose, are precisely those that give rise to the sentiment that aesthetic judgement is 'curious', as described above.

The first pre-theoretical belief pertains to the phenomenology of aesthetic properties. We may formulate this belief as such: detection of aesthetic properties is linked to the observer having a qualitatively distinct, aesthetically or otherwise emotionally 'coloured' experience. The cuteness of a bear seems to be bound up with overwhelming sympathy, the sombreness of a funeral with sadness and dignity. The second pre-theoretical belief is that we can be right or wrong when we say that something is cute or sombre. Preserving these two beliefs forms the two desiderata for a good ontology of aesthetic properties: a good ontology should try to justify each of these beliefs and relieve any apparent tension between them. I take this to merely clarify the uncontroversial common goal shared between the non-realist and the realist and to make the ontological project interesting to those aestheticians suspicious of metaphysics: the ontology here is fully in the service of a long-standing intuitive problem in aesthetics. However, two important, but less obvious, points follow.

The first is that our pre-theoretical beliefs might themselves merit further investigation. Notice that I have described aesthetic properties as seeming to be 'coloured by', 'linked to', or 'bound up' with some emotionally or aesthetically distinct experience. However, as I am about to argue, greater clarity can be achieved regarding what exactly the link *is* between perceiving a scene aesthetically and having the relevant experiential response. Once we have established what the link is, this should influence our ontology.

The second point is that satisfying each pre-theoretical belief is merely a *pro tanto* rather than a decisive argument in favour of any given ontology. There might well be other considerations, such as parsimony. For example, if the cost of satisfying the manifest image is to posit new *sui generis* entities (such as 'magical experiential tinges of things'), then that is a cost we should not pay. Realism and non-realism therefore compete at satisfying both beliefs, while each tries to stay true to some respectable view of what else exists in the world. I will argue that a version of realism succeeds in doing just that.

3 Perceiving Aesthetic Properties

Let me begin by considering in a little more detail the first of the two pre-theoretical beliefs I identified above: the idea that the detection of aesthetic properties is 'bound up' with certain recognizable responses. One might assume that non-realism has the best handle on this belief. Non-realism holds that Knut's cuteness is *reducible* to the feeling of sympathy that Knut triggers in the judging subject's mind; and this seems pretty straightforwardly to describe the sense in which our

detection of Knut's cuteness is 'bound up' with a particular emotion. This way of explaining the phenomenology seems to be further supported by an analogy that might be taken to exist between the detection of aesthetic properties and the detection of more 'basic' sensory properties such as colours, gustatory tastes, smells, sounds, and haptic sensations.¹⁰ Seeing that something is orange seems to be reducible to the subject's having that particular, qualitative, yellow–red sensation; tasting something sour is reducible to having that unpleasant, mouth-wrenching taste in your mouth; smelling a citric fragrance is equivalent to undergoing that particular lemony smell. And likewise, seeing something cute may seem reducible to the observer undergoing that particular, qualitatively distinct, 'aww, how cute!' feeling of overwhelming sympathy.

I now wish to suggest that it is far from clear that such a non-realist analysis has a good handle on the phenomenology when it comes to aesthetic properties. Our detection of aesthetic properties, I submit, is *not* simply reducible to the subject actually undergoing the relevant, distinct experience. To motivate my view, let me describe a putative case of aesthetic judgement.

(Attentive Artist) Consider this fictional but not implausible story of how Robert Delaunay might have painted his Saint-Séverin series (Figure 2). The artist enters the church and is struck by the drama of light and shadow that unravels in the Gothic aisles. He is overwhelmed and excited: he sees an exhilarating playfulness there. He then sets out to convey this quality of the scene in a painting. As he sets to work, however, he must attend carefully and calmly to the scene. The initial feeling of exhilaration disappears, perhaps to return only occasionally. Indeed, as he returns to the church to paint the picture over several sessions, his mood is not always the same. And yet it must be the *playfulness* of the light and shadow that he focuses on. It is precisely this quality, after all, that he is trying to capture.



Figure 2.

Robert Delaunay, *Saint Séverin No. 3*, oil on canvas, 114.1 × 88.6 cm (1909–10). Image in public domain.

I have intentionally described the case in a loose vocabulary so as not to prejudge the analysis. However, I think the case points to a *prima facie* disanalogy between aesthetic perception and perception of colour. It seems to be a 'basic phenomenological fact', as Mark Johnston puts it, that we see colours as relatively 'steady' features of external objects (Johnston 1992, p. 226). In a standard

case of colour perception, a person who walks into a red room and sees that it is red typically undergoes the qualitative experience of redness. The redness is immediately with the person and stays with the person: in the standard case, at least, we do not expect the experience of redness to wane and flicker.¹¹ Perceiving aesthetic properties, however, is quite unlike this. As Delaunay observes the church, it is easy to imagine that his emotional and qualitative experience of the interior would vary and wane, and that it may—as we might imagine when Delaunay focuses on the said aesthetic quality most attentively—disappear entirely. Indeed, it would be strange to presuppose that as Delaunay tries to capture the playfulness, perhaps over several sittings, he must constantly be in the same state of exhilaration.

Far from this being an unusual case, I wish to suggest that it seems typical of our aesthetic lives that we perceive an aesthetic property in an object without undergoing the relevant experience. It seems easy to imagine a jaded Leonardo scholar who would be less enraptured by seeing the *Mona Lisa* than a clueless tourist. In spite of this, we may want to say that the scholar *discerns* the mysterious qualities of the painting much better. A high-fashion couturier picking dresses for that night's catwalk might immediately be able to *tell* an elegant dress from a gaudy one. Nevertheless, she may do so dispassionately, without indulging in full-blown adoration or aversion. Or you may think of the time you over-listened to a favourite *Aida* recording. You can presumably still *spot* the points of grandeur, even if your feelings are sadly no longer evoked. The point of these cases is not just that aesthetic experience is more ephemeral than colour experience. It also seems that in cases where we would want to say the subject is attributing an aesthetic property on the basis of direct *perception* of that property that the experience is curiously not reliably there, or is even absent entirely.

Extrapolating from (attentive artist) to aesthetic properties more generally, I wish to suggest that the phenomenology of aesthetic properties is remarkable in the following way. The paradigm case of aesthetic judgement—that is, the attribution of an aesthetic property to an object on the basis of direct perceptual acquaintance with the property—is certainly *connected* to some distinct, recognizable experience. Perceiving that something is playful, say, is in some way connected to a certain kind of qualitatively distinct exhilarating experience. However, the non-realist's starting intuition, namely, that this connection is one of *being reducible to* is contradicted by these cases. Instead, these cases lead us to describe the perception of an aesthetic property as a matter of looking out for the relevant experience in the object, or seeing the object as having the capacity to yield an experience, or as seeing the promise of something more that the object has yet to offer.¹²

For now I wish to suggest that these cases offer a puzzle for the non-realist. If aesthetic properties can be perceived without the observer having the relevant experience, then the non-realist's claim that aesthetic judgements are reducible to the subject undergoing that experience comes under attack. Of course, an opponent may want to dispute the cases I have presented here, and I will return to possible objections in Section 5. For now, however, these cases provide me with a motivation to develop an alternative, realist view, which can accommodate them.

4 Aesthetic Powers

The position I want to offer is as follows. While the attentive artist does not himself necessarily feel exhilarated when he is trying to capture the playfulness of the light in Saint-Séverin, what he looks out for is the capacity, propensity, or aptitude of the scene to inspire that feeling. To settle on a single term, the subject perceives the *power* the object has to cause a certain experience. Here is the view:

Aesthetic Power Realism (APR) Objects in the external world possess aesthetic properties. Aesthetic property P is the power an object has to cause experience E in observer O.

Crucially, I hasten to add, the notion of 'power' here is meant to be 'meaty' enough to allow for external objects to possess it and to allow for the subject to observe such a power without at the same

time undergoing the relevant experience. The formulation of such an account will require some subtlety; let me now look more closely at recent philosophical accounts of what powers might be.

Consider the following ascriptions of properties to objects: this glass is fragile, my key can open that door, lead is poisonous, Wanda is amiable. We describe objects as having these properties readily enough, yet objects do not seem to have them in virtue of some *state* in which they presently find themselves, but in virtue of something they can do or that may happen to them. One name for such properties has stuck in the philosophical literature: dispositions. Dispositions contrast with *categorical properties*, such as being round: dispositions point towards some possible scenario; categorical properties do not point beyond themselves. Most philosophers discussing dispositions agree that conventional dispositions can be roughly identified in virtue of stimulus and manifestation conditions, and counterfactual conditionals linking the two. For example, the ‘fragility’ of *x* can be identified by means of some counterfactual conditional such as ‘if *x* were struck, *x* would break’.¹³

To flesh out aspects of dispositions relevant to aesthetic properties, I turn to Barbara Vetter's recent account (Vetter 2015, Chapter 1, esp. pp. 1–2, 19–22). The most frequently discussed dispositional properties are *de se* sure-fire dispositions, such as the water solubility of a sugar cube. However, Vetter points out that there is a broader group of dispositional properties—she uses the umbrella term ‘potentiality’—that point to something beyond what is currently the case. Dispositional properties are not all sure-fire, but come in degrees: the fragile and the sturdy bridge seem to be on a continuum of the same property. Further, manifestations in terms of which dispositions are individuated may have to do with objects other than themselves. Though individuated by an effect in people, lead's poisonousness has something to do with the nature of *lead*. ‘Abilities’, ‘capacities’, and ‘powers’ are perhaps the chief terms we use for dispositional properties that are individuated by an external manifestation, but that are nonetheless intrinsic properties of the object in question.¹⁴ I wish to propose that aesthetic properties are among this broader array of dispositional properties. They are the intrinsic powers of objects to affect the human mind; they are individuated by the kind of experience they can bring about; and the strength and reliability of that power comes in degrees.

This still leaves it open as to how exactly we should conceive of such powers, so I want to make a stronger and more precise claim. The debate in which I am interested here is between those who think that attributions of dispositions are ultimately *reducible* to some categorical property and those who think that at least some dispositions are *irreducibly dispositional*. Those in the first group, let's call them ‘categoricalists’, are drawn towards a picture of the world as populated by simple, actually instantiated, categorical states.¹⁵ Categoricalists reduce properties like ‘fragility’ to categorical bases, such as the structural features of the glass, plus something else, for example, the laws of nature or close possible worlds, which explain the breaking of the glass when struck. On the other side we have those, let's call them ‘dispositionalists’, who would rather explain the behaviour of objects by reference to an irreducibly dispositional, causally efficient property possessed by the object.¹⁶ An intuitive case here may be one of a twisted metal rod, cooled down in liquid helium: this makes it brittle, and its brittleness causes it to break (Mellor 1991, p. 116). Aside from the question of causality, the case for such irreducible dispositions has been argued across many areas of philosophy, including natural laws and modality, and is part of a recent shift against the prevalent Humean influence in metaphysics (Vetter 2015, pp. 1–2, 7–8, 24).

Where does this leave aesthetic properties? Recall that non-realism allows for subtly different options. The non-realist can take Knut's cuteness not to exist (eliminativism) or conceive of it as existing in a ‘thin’ or ‘quasi’ sense: kind of there but not quite on a par with Knut's hirsuteness. Indeed, one way in which non-realists have expressed this thin sense is by saying that aesthetic properties are ‘response-dependent’ or ‘dispositional’ properties, expressed in terms such as these:

An object *O* has an aesthetic property *P*. \longleftrightarrow Should some idealised viewer *V* observe *P*, *O* would elicit the relevant experience *E* in *V*.¹⁷

The contrast between categoricalist and dispositionalist views of dispositions allows us to state more precisely what the non-realist might mean by this, and what my realist alternative looks like.

The non-realist, I take it, understands the right-hand side of the biconditional to be explanatorily fundamental. Knut's possession of cuteness is reducible to the would-be response of some observer, given Knut's appearance. The non-realist project is aligned, in other words, with the categoricalist's attempt to reduce dispositions to the more fundamental categorical properties. In this case, what is taken to be at the bottom of cuteness are the big eyes and furriness of Knut and psychological laws about (ideal) observers; cuteness is reducible to that collection of facts. How we should conceive of 'reducible to' is a contested issue amongst categoricalists; perhaps the best-known option is to say that dispositions are mere 'second-order' properties (Prior et al. 1982, pp. 253–256; Prior 1985, pp. 82–95). Analogously, we could say that cuteness is merely a second-order property of *having* some such shape so as to elicit, given further facts about ideal observers, the response of sympathy in them. Cuteness, then, is a *property of the object* only in a very thin sense.

I also wish to conceive of aesthetic properties as dispositional, though in accordance with strong, dispositionalist metaphysics. According to APR as I conceive of it, it is the object's possession of an irreducibly dispositional, first-order, causally efficient aesthetic property, which is explanatory of the right-hand side of the biconditional. Knut has the power to cause sympathy in his observers, and that is what explains how people react to him. His cuteness is no more 'second-order' than his hirsuteness or his other powers, such as his ability to swim or his strength. Henceforth, when I say 'power' I will mean powers in this strong dispositionalist sense.¹⁸

For now, my point is just that, ontologically, the realist and the non-realist ways of conceiving of aesthetic properties as dispositional are different. So why is this not just ontological hair-splitting? Why should we favour APR?

5 The Argument from Phenomenology

The first argument in support of my ontological position comes in three steps. The way the argument is structured involves reorganizing the material I have already presented, so let me state the argument fairly briefly.

The first step is to claim that the cases I presented in Section 3 are indeed paradigm cases of aesthetic judgement: that is, the subject in each case attributes the aesthetic property to the object on the basis of perception. Aesthetic properties can therefore be perceived without the subject having the relevant experience. In (attentive artist), Delaunay sees playfulness without being exhilarated.

The second step is to offer an ontological explanation, which matches this picture of what goes on in aesthetic judgement. In other words, we need an account about what we perceive aesthetic properties to be, so as to best capture the phenomenology just described. My explanation is to say that we perceive aesthetic properties as causally efficient powers. This involves coupling dispositionalism with a rich account of perception, whereby we may actually directly perceive such powers rather than merely postulate their existence. Now, whether or not we can perceive powers is a contested issue among philosophers. Those who argue for dispositionalism in metaphysics tend to be neutral about whether we can perceive modal categories (Vetter 2015, p. 12), but there certainly are several accounts of perception that say that we can (Nanay 2013, pp. 23–25, 111–115, 131–133; Strohminger 2015). My goal here is to show that some such account is a good way of explaining the aesthetic cases. The aesthetic case is analogous to the perception of the capacity of a sharp blade to cause us pain when we balance it against the veins, or of the capacity for ice to give in as it crackles under our steps. This kind of a property is what the attentive artist—or the jaded scholar, hurried couturier, or repeat listener from my examples—recognize. The subject sees the power the object has to move her in a certain way.

The third step involves a return to the methodology that I argued for in Section 2. For non-fundamental properties such as aesthetic properties, capturing the phenomenology gives us a *pro tanto* reason to accept the ontological point. If we perceive aesthetic properties as powers, this is reason to think that they *are* powers.

Since I am developing a new view here, it is important to note that each of these steps will meet with disagreement and that each step comes with obligations in other areas of philosophy. Instead of attempting a comprehensive defence and literature review, let me now suggest what the most obvious pressure points against the argument might be.

My opponent might attempt to trip me up at the very first step. This would involve denying that a case like (attentive artist) is a case of *perceiving* the scene aesthetically *at all*; that is, denying that such cases are instances of a paradigmatic case of aesthetic judgement. What appears to be an obvious alternative explanation for these cases is that they are merely cases of inferential thinking. For example, Alan Goldman, who is non-realist about aesthetic properties, describes derivative, non-paradigmatic aesthetic judgements as inferential in this way: aesthetically insensitive audiences can recognize merit in works that leave them cold, ‘in accordance with their conception of judgements of those more sensitive’ (Goldman 1995, p. 22). Similarly, perhaps the attentive artist is thinking something along the lines of ‘what I see causes me no exhilarating experience now, but I know these shapes are likely to cause exhilaration when I am less preoccupied and more sensitive’. It is only in this deflated, inferential sense that the attentive artist judges the scene to be playful.

I have two replies to this line of attack. First, the attack wrongly implies that at the point of dispassionate attention the experts from my examples are epistemically further removed from the property they are studying. In Alan Goldman's case, those making the inferential judgement do so because they themselves lack the capacity to properly appraise the object. However, notice that the cases I have offered are cases of aesthetic expertise; the idea, then, is that it seems easy to imagine a dispassionate perceiver in a position of epistemic superiority. It seems perfectly plausible that a jaded expert has lost the ability to be excited by the *Mona Lisa* through overexposure. Yet it seems implausible to say that in such a case the expert no longer sees the aesthetic quality of the painting, but that the clueless tourist does. Similarly, there seems to be no non-question-begging reason to suppose that as Delaunay *focusses* on the playfulness of the church scene, he somehow perceives that playfulness less clearly (and starts inferring it). More plausibly, one might argue that Delaunay sees the playfulness more clearly; after all, it is precisely this quality that he is trying to capture in his work.

My second reply is that the attack wrongly implies that there is a difference *in kind* between a case in which the perceiver has a strongly felt response (e.g. when the artist first walks into the church) and his or her dispassionate study of the object. As with the attentive artist example, we can easily imagine a *continuity* between the initial ‘wow’ effect and the subsequent waning and waxing of experience. As the artist focuses on the quality of the scene, it is conceivable that his experience arises, wanes, is gone, and returns. Are we to say that here the subject is constantly flicking between direct perception and inferential thinking? If we recognize a phenomenological continuity here, then we ought to posit merely one mental process—direct perception—rather than two—perception and inference—to be at work.¹⁹ To say that what goes on is flicking between perceptual aesthetic judgement and inferential ‘if-then’ thinking over-intellectualizes the involved and continuous process. By contrast, we secure the continuity by saying that the artist perceives a power of the object: the power may be manifest in lower or lesser degrees, but the mental process with which we track it is the same.

A second line of attack would involve agreeing with the first step—that the cases I describe are cases of perceiving aesthetic properties—but offer an alternative explanation. The opponent could claim that aesthetic properties are perceived as *categorical* properties, only that the *intensity* of our

perception of them can vary. The cases I describe are similar, on this view, to perceiving a colour less intensely as the light fades. My attentive artist, jaded scholar, and hasty couturier similarly perceive their aesthetic properties more dimly.

This objection fails for the same reason as the first. Whereas a fading light causes us to see the colour less intensely and therefore *less well*, the cases I have put forward suggest no such correlation between epistemic access and intensity for aesthetic properties. The hurried couturier or the jaded scholar have a dispassionate experience of the objects they are appraising, but this in itself seems no reason to think that their epistemic access to the aesthetic quality in question is somehow more restricted than that of a more excitable novice. The idea that what they perceive better is the power of the object allows us to capture this disparity in epistemic access nicely.

Third, my opponent could accept my first two steps and agree that we perceive aesthetic properties as powers. However, she might dispute that this entitles me to the claim that we perceive powers in the strong, dispositionalist sense. Recall the ‘thin’ notion of dispositions: dispositions are taken to exist but they are taken to be systematically reducible to categorical properties like shapes and colours and psychological laws governing would-be responses. If the non-realist can say that aesthetic properties are dispositions *in some way*, she can arguably also make sense of the phenomenology of which I have been making so much.

However, if we consider *how* powers are taken to be reducible to categorical bases, this reply collapses. As noted, some categoricists have claimed that dispositions are mere ‘second-order’ properties: to be fragile is the property of *having some such categorical property* so as to break when struck (Prior et al. 1982). However, surely this view of dispositions does not square with our *phenomenology* of dispositions (nor is it intended to). We would then have to say that the attentive artist is trying to focus on some property of having a property, and it is hard to see what that claim would amount to. If my opponent grants that we perceive aesthetic properties as powers, then surely the notion of powers here has to be the strong one: a causally effective, first-order force of the object in question. My claim here is that we should compare what goes on in aesthetic cases with that dynamic, imminent sense of something about to happen, as with ice about to give in, not with perception of some abstract philosophical notion (like a property of a property).

I hope this settles the more obvious objections to my explanation of the cases I have discussed. Of course, one might also object to the first two steps of my argument on the basis of dismissing the tenability of the philosophical views on which I rely. One might have independent reasons for believing there are no causally efficient powers, and one might have independent reasons for favouring a sparse account of perception, whereby we can never perceive modal properties such as powers.²⁰ If that is so, then of course my account could not possibly be correct. However, to object in this manner would be to misconceive the dialectic. It is not my goal to defend substantial views in metaphysics and in philosophy of perception here; I am merely trying to show the work they can accomplish in accounting for these new cases in aesthetics. If one wants to dismiss these substantial views, one still owes an alternative explanation for my examples. And I have tried to show that an alternative is not so easy to come by.

Recalling the methodology advanced in Section 2, this allows me to now make the final, third step. If we can best make sense of our phenomenological conception of aesthetic properties by saying that we perceive them as powers, this is a reason to think that they are powers. This step is not as controversial as it might seem once we recall that we are talking about non-fundamental properties, and it may be useful at this juncture to look again at philosophy of colour for comparison. As noted, Johnston and others have suggested that the way colours are revealed to us in experience should not clash with our ontological account of what they *are*. Accordingly, several philosophers have argued *against* a dispositionalist account of colours on the basis that we do *not* perceptually represent colours as powers that object have. The redness of red objects does not *look like* a power to cause an

experience of redness. The objects simply look red, and it is a kind of ‘primitivist’ or ‘monadic’ view of colours that perhaps best captures this claim.²¹ I find this account plausible when it comes to colour and think that we perceive colours as intrinsic, primitive, categorical properties that objects have. However, whatever one thinks of colours, there is no reason to think that the phenomenology of aesthetic properties could not be different. As I have argued, we perceive aesthetic properties as causally efficient powers. And so, the theory that says that aesthetic properties *are* causally efficient powers can claim the virtue of matching our phenomenology.

One should emphasize, then, that the argument from phenomenology is merely a *pro tanto* argument for APR. Indeed, with regards to colours, some theorists accept that their view does *not* track the phenomenology, but argue that on balance, it still ought to be preferred (Johnston 1992, pp. 221, 226–227). Analogously, it may be that even if I am right and aesthetic properties *do* look like powers, on balance, APR ought to be dismissed. My point for now is just that the phenomenology stands in my favour.

6 The Argument from Objectivity of Aesthetic Judgement

As I noted in the introduction, the focus of the debate has been on the ‘antinomy of taste’: given the non-realism of aesthetic properties, can we show that aesthetic judgements are in some sense objective? Are we, in other words, sometimes justified in demanding that others agree with the aesthetic judgements we make? The problems facing the non-realist here have been much debated; the chief of these is circularity. I will argue that APR secures objectivity without encountering circularity, while retaining some of the benefits of non-realism.

For convenience's sake, let me restate non-realism and APR:

Non-realism: Attributions of aesthetic properties are characteristically reducible to reports of experiences in the mind of the observer. Therefore, objects in the external world do not possess aesthetic properties.

Aesthetic Power Realism: Aesthetic property P is the power an object has to cause experience E in observer O.

Recall the crucial difference that I pointed out in Section 3. For the non-realist, the truth-maker of a claim like ‘x is playful’ is the would-be experience of the judging subject. In the case of APR, the truth-maker is the power of the object to cause an experience in an observer. Both views, then, relativize the instantiation of an aesthetic property to some observer. Here comes the crucial further implication. In the case of APR, the judging subject does not necessarily demand agreement with *her own experience*. The judge demands agreement with her claim that an object has the power to cause an experience in some observer. In other words, *the subject demanding agreement* and *the observer to whose experience aesthetic properties are relativized* can come apart.

What are the implications of this distinction? Consider a well-known problem befalling the non-realist. According to non-realism, aesthetic judgement refers to the judge's own feeling; so, if others do not share that feeling, how could the judge possibly demand that others agree with her judgement? Non-realists have tried to solve the antinomy by saying more about *the kind of ideal subject* who is entitled to demand agreement with her subjective responses. Following on from Hume's *On the Standard of Taste*, the literature on such ‘idealised critics’ is huge; however, the strategy has mostly been two-pronged. First, philosophers have tried to identify the ideal critic by means of auxiliary virtues, such as delicacy, practice, ability to make comparisons, lack of bias, and good sense (Kivy 1967; Mothersill 1989; Levinson 2002). Second, they have tried to reassure us that at least as time passes, and within suitably identified sub-areas of interest, critics will tend to agree and therefore corroborate each other's judgements (Ross 2014). The charge hovering over these attempts made by the non-realist is circularity. Who gets to decide which critics have made the relevant comparisons or

possess the relevant practice? If ideal critics prove themselves by having their judgements corroborated by others over time, who corroborates *those* judgements? Non-realism seems to explain how mutually reinforcing cartels of taste get formed, but it is not easy to see in what sense any of them got it right.

I will not discuss whether the non-realist can meet the charge of circularity here. I merely want to point out that the charge does not arise at all for APR. According to APR, recall, the critic's *own* experiential response does not necessarily form her judgement. In attributing an aesthetic property to an object, the critic is claiming that the object has the power to affect some observers in some way. Unlike with non-realism, however, the identity of those observers and the conditions under which they will be affected is downstream from the philosophical claim. Their identity will be fixed simply within the context of critical discourse. When a critic describes a mountain range as beautiful, she may be ascribing to it the power to move almost any human mind; when she praises a modernist artwork, the observer to whom its worth is relative will perhaps be tightly circumscribed to those familiar with the idiom of modernist painting.

It might be objected that this view leads to relativism, but far from it: the critic is free to restrict or expand the audience she has in mind, as she likes. APR simply provides the framework within which we can understand her claims as being true or false, whatever their intended scope. APR conceives of aesthetic judgements as similar to disposition-attributing empirical judgements such as 'x is fragile' or 'y is poisonous' or 'z is curative'. Therefore, APR casts critical discourse in terms of epistemic justification, which is independent from the critic's own feelings or credentials. To agree or disagree with the critic's claims, we might test her on questions such as: Over what audience exactly do you take the work to have this power? Is it a power great or small; subtle or direct? In comparison to which other works do you think this power is remarkable? In substantiating her claims, the critic may have to draw on shared experience or even on empirical—say art historical, psychological, or even neuroscientific—reports. However, we need not check whether the critic has been recognized as a good judge by some plenum of like-minded experiencers. And so the charge of circularity does not arise.

One might complain that I have miscast the critic in the role of a cold, calculating scientist. However, APR does not *exclude* the possibility that the critic relies on her own responses in arriving at her judgements. Indeed, the view is silent on that issue: the critic may be someone who melts with emotion or someone who—like the Leonardo scholar—has grown jaded. Quite possibly, it will be a combination of the two. Similarly, a porcelain expert may judge the fragility of a vase by how it looks and feels, but may then draw on other data to supplement her claim. Since attributed aesthetic properties (probably but not necessarily) have to do with the powers objects have over people in some respects similar to the critic, personal experience and intuition can remain a crucial part of aesthetic judgement. APR then preserves this advantage from non-realism.

I have argued that if we want to preserve the belief that aesthetic judgement is in some sense objective, APR provides us with a simpler route to that conclusion than non-realism. As the critic is essentially making claims about objects rather than herself, she can demand agreement with her judgements not because of her credentials, but because of the truth of her claims. In the shadow of Hume and Kant, who both suggested that there is a division between empirical and aesthetic judgements,²² my view surely sounds heretical. Short of a full conversion, I hope to have at least shown some of the attractions of straying from the orthodoxy.

7 Ontology and the Manifest Image

I have tried to stake out the territory for a new realist position on the ontology of aesthetic properties. It is quite beyond my means to offer a comprehensive defence here. In conclusion, let me therefore limit myself to a few remarks on the 'big picture' and the methodology employed.

First, I wish to comment on the relationship between an ontology of aesthetic properties and the ‘manifest image’, that is, our pre-theoretical beliefs about them. I argued that APR satisfies, better than the non-realist alternative, our pre-theoretical beliefs regarding aesthetic judgements. These beliefs pertain to the phenomenology of aesthetic judgements (what it feels like to be in the presence of an aesthetically significant object) and to the objectivity of aesthetic judgements (the sense that such judgements are not a free-for-all). The satisfaction of each belief counts as a *pro tanto* argument in favour of the ontological theory.

It ought to be noted, however, that I have not treated the pre-theoretical beliefs as rock-steady entities. As per the methodology I set out in Section 2, the whole point of the ontological exercise with regards to non-fundamental entities is to clarify our muddled preconceptions with regards to properties and entities that are of significance in our lives. Such a clarification might involve subtle revisions. With regards to our beliefs about the phenomenology of aesthetic judgement, I have tried to move us away from the idea that aesthetic judgement is reducible to the subject's having a qualitatively remarkable experience. In aesthetic judgement, such an experience may be lacking. In that case, the subject perceives the object as having the power to afford her a qualitatively remarkable experience. With regard to our beliefs about the objectivity of aesthetic judgement, I have also nudged us towards a rather different picture of the critic than the one subscribed to by the non-realist. The critic who is correct is not some supremely sensitive connoisseur who reliably undergoes the required aesthetic experience. She is rather more like an intuitive expert on the powers that objects have over humans. She may rely on intuition, but is willing to engage in argument and qualification of her claims. The link between a new ontological theory of non-fundamental properties and the beliefs of the manifest image, then, is that the theory should plausibly clarify the beliefs, and this might involve putting a different spin on them.

Further, the discussion so far may lead us to reflect on the relationship between ontology in aesthetics and theories in other areas of philosophy. Here, I have aimed to satisfy pre-theoretical beliefs about aesthetic experience; however, to justify those beliefs, one of course ought not to posit ontological theses that are radically at odds with everything else we believe about the world. While APR does not posit any properties that are obviously ‘crazy’, it does have a stake in current and rather contentious philosophical debates. As I have made clear, the view presupposes a dispositionalist account of irreducible and causally efficient dispositions, as well as a rich account of perception, whereby critics are able to directly perceive powers. Dismiss these views, and APR collapses. Is this price too high?

Certainly, my view comes as part of a package. As the tide turns against the Humean influence in metaphysics, it is perhaps fitting to find alternatives to the Humean approach in aesthetics. And yet, I want to resist the dialectical insinuation that APR is hostage to how the debate pans out in other fields of philosophy. The dependence ought to go both ways. It ought to be a virtue of a view in one area of philosophy to be able to solve problems in another. If dispositionalism helps us solve a long-standing problem in aesthetics, then surely this is a feature that recommends the package as a whole.

Finally, as is customary in analytic philosophy, I have based my arguments here on simple thought experiments. My aim was to achieve a higher degree of clarity than would have been possible had I described a case like Delaunay's in all of its historical complexity. However, my hope for debates in aesthetics, even those as specialized as the debate on the ontology of aesthetic properties, is that they have something to contribute to discussions of art that aim to be more sensitive to our cultural and historical context. Developments both in recent art history and art criticism suggest a shift away from the Humean and Kantian, subject-first picture of aesthetic experience, which emphasized connoisseurship and the idealized subject as the seat of empirical, ethical, and aesthetic knowledge. For some time, critics and historians alike have been more concerned with what we might call an object-first picture, that is, with the power that objects have over perceivers as fallible, non-idealized, politically situated subjects. This shift may be observed, for example, in the interest in the ‘living

presence' effect that objects have on viewers (Gaiger 2011; van Eck 2015); in the attributions of agency to images, objects and artworks (Bredenkamp 2010; Apter *et al.* 2016); and in the interest in interactive and relational artworks (Bourriaud 2002). In a way to be still explored, metaphysics of powers may have conceptual resources to offer such recent undertakings.

Notes

1.

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2.

Some set the scope of the aesthetic by reference to art criticism (Sibley 1959); others by reference to central aesthetic concepts like beauty and ugliness (Zangwill 2001, Chapter 2).

3.

In the footsteps of Hume or Kant, the many philosophers who take this view include Scruton (1974), Goldman (1995), Sibley (2001), Matravers (2005), and Ross (2014). Schellekens (2008) offers some terminological disentangling.

4.

Whether or not one can make aesthetic judgements on the basis of testimony is a contested issue (Budd 2003; Hopkins 2011).

5.

Addressed by philosophers quoted at fn. 2. Note that some philosophers use the label 'realism' to denote merely the prospect of securing agreement among ideal critics, given a non-realist ontology (Goldman 1995, p. 26ff; Ross 2014).

6.

Their term for non-realism is the 'response-dependence view'.

7.

Cf. Levinson (2005), pp. 211, 218–219, 223–226. On colour primitivism, see Barry (2012), #6.2.

8.

The phrase is Wilfrid Sellars', but in formulating this methodology, I loosely follow Dennett (2013).

9.

Johnston's phrase is 'core beliefs' (Johnston 1992, pp. 221. See also 226–227). See also Hyman's discussion of the 'basic conception' of colours (Hyman 2006, pp. 17–19).

10.

Hume's comparison between 'mental and bodily taste'—our exercise of aesthetic judgement and gustatory judgement—has helped to furnish this intuition (Hume 1998a, p. 141). However, even those sympathetic to realism hold onto the analogy between sensory and aesthetic properties (Levinson 2005, pp. 217–219; Watkins and Shelley 2012, pp. 338–339).

11.

This is the established view, but for discussion see Cohen (2010).

12.

The reader may rightly be reminded of Alexander Nehamas' account, based on Stendhal's famous remark that beauty is a *promise* of happiness. Note, however, that Nehamas' arguments are not concerned with an ontology of aesthetic properties (Nehamas 2007).

13.

It has been hotly debated whether such a conditional analysis ultimately succeeds. See, e.g. Martin (1994), Lewis (1997), Bird (1998), Manley and Wasserman (2008), and Vetter (2014).

14.

Cf. Vetter (2015), pp. 124–125, 215. A useful sense of 'intrinsic' here is 'would have to be shared by an exact duplicate' (McKittrick 2003, pp. 158–159).

15.

Categoricalists include Armstrong (1973), Prior et al. (1982), and Lewis (1997).

16.

Dispositionalists include Mellor (1991), Martin (1994), Molnar (2003), Bird (2007), and Vetter (2015).

17.

Cf. Goldman (1995), p. 21.

18.

Levinson (2002) comes close to my view when he suggests that 'artistic *value*' is a 'capacity' (Levinson 2002, p. 232; my emphasis). In the 2002 paper Levinson's view remains ambiguous between the realist and non-realist readings as I define them. However, when Levinson later formulates a realist view of *aesthetic properties*, he explicitly says he does *not* take them to be dispositions (Levinson 2005, pp. 219–220).

19.

This point is roughly inspired by Siegel (2007).

20.

Among aestheticians, this is a view relied on by Hyman (2006), pp. 48–51.

21.

This is argued by Boghossian and Velleman (1989); cf. Marmodoro (2006), p. 74. Cohen (2010) has argued that colours are perceived as dispositions, but this is a minority view.

22.

There is room for interpretative disagreement here, but this is certainly at least the starting point from which both philosophers frame the problems of taste. Hume states the contrast most explicitly in *The Sceptic* (Hume 1998b, p. 99); Kant in §1 of the *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 2000, pp. 203–204).

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