

Meta-ethics and Meta-aesthetics

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Abstract: Metaethics is a live and flourishing subdiscipline of ethics, and meta-aesthetics flourishes in aesthetics, but only infrequently under that title. Still, in the long history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art, a great many thinkers have delved into meta-aesthetic issues. Given their different histories and focal points, metaethics and meta-aesthetics have gone in somewhat different directions. As a result, both would benefit from more contemporary cross-pollination. This article will investigate four epicenters of debate that should be of importance to anyone working in meta-aesthetics. It will also provisionally defend realism, partly to illustrate how the arguments work, but partly to show that aesthetic realism isn't the non-starter it is sometimes taken to be.

Keywords: metaethics, meta-aesthetics, realism, cognitivism, response-dependence, objectivity, subjectivity, aesthetic value, disagreement, testimony, aesthetic judgment, acquaintance principle

Metaethics and meta-aesthetics are about, respectively, the nature of morality and the nature of aesthetics. They are concerned with questions about the metaphysical status of moral or aesthetic facts, the epistemological status of moral or aesthetic belief and knowledge, the psychological status of moral or aesthetic judgments and attitudes, and the linguistic status of moral or aesthetic statements. They are not concerned with what are sometimes called normative or first-order questions, including what is right or wrong or what is beautiful or ugly. Rather, they are concerned to ask questions about how it could come to be that *anything* really is right or beautiful, how we could come to know that, what is involved in thinking it, and what it would mean to say so.

Metaethics is a live and flourishing subdiscipline of ethics, and meta-aesthetics flourishes in aesthetics, but only infrequently under that title. Still, in the long history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art, a great many thinkers have delved into these issues. The nature of aesthetic judgment, for example, is one of the most frequently recurring topics in pre-modern and modern European aesthetics. Given their different histories and focal points, metaethics and meta-aesthetics have gone in somewhat different directions. As a result, both would benefit from more contemporary cross-pollination. This article will investigate four epicenters of debate that should be of importance to anyone working in meta-aesthetics. It will also provisionally defend realism, partly to illustrate how the arguments work, but partly to show that aesthetic realism isn't the non-starter it is sometimes taken to be.

1. The Traditional Options

The most obvious motif in the tapestry of metaethical views is realism versus antirealism. Each of these views comes in many varieties, and there are views that are not obviously on one side or the other: relativism, subjectivism, constructivism, and even sophisticated expressivism. Considering how aesthetics would fit into this entire taxonomy is not my present goal. This is in part because metaethicists have spent a lot of time and effort trying to carefully delineate these views and the boundaries between them, so much so that even this taxonomical project is its own sub-genre of metaethics. It is also in part because I think that these taxonomies translate very straightforwardly to aesthetics. Metaethics textbooks usually contain a flowchart one can follow, using yes-or-no questions, that maps out the major options and illustrates how the views are related to one another. But you can pick up any metaethics textbook and replace all moral terminology with aesthetic terminology, and the chart works just as well¹ – even if you might want to answer some of the questions differently.

It is thus not my aim give a detailed guide to these flowcharts; in other words, my central aim is not taxonomical. Instead, we will look at the most significant debates in metaethical discussions. These debates often don't appear transparently as decision points on these flowcharts, but they are crucial in defending and rejecting different metaethical views. These are importantly diagnostic, too, in that they help or force us to answer the flowchart questions one way or another. We will look at how such debates would in principle or do in fact manifest in aesthetics. By differently framing the existing space of meta-aesthetic theory, this article will hopefully provide some new ways into old debates.

Still, in order to understand the broad debates discussed below, we need a working understanding of some major classificatory distinctions. Four classes will be essential in what follows: realism and antirealism, and cognitivism and noncognitivism.

The definition of realism is itself a matter of some controversy, but we need not concern ourselves here with that. In its simplest form, *realism* (for a given normative domain) holds that there are genuine facts (in that domain). It also holds that we can get it right or wrong about those facts, and we do so insofar as our judgments match or fail to match the facts. Typically, those facts must also be mind-independent, i.e., not dependent on our beliefs or attitudes. For example, the fact that I like olives depends on my attitudes and so is not mind-independent, but the fact that olives grow on trees does not depend on anybody's beliefs or attitudes and so is mind-independent. *Antirealism* is just the denial of realism.

¹ Miller (2013) and Van Roojen (2015) contain good instances.

In holding that we can get it right or wrong about the normative facts, realists are committed to saying that these normative judgments can be true or false. That is, they are committed to *cognitivism*. Cognitivism for a given normative domain holds that those normative judgments are fundamentally representational or belief-like: they contain contents whose standard for correctness is truth or fit with the way the world is.² Because they can be true or false, they are called truth-apt. *Noncognitivism*, on the other hand, holds that those normative judgments do not have representational content and are not truth-apt.³ Instead, they more closely resemble desires or even commands. They are more akin to wants, wishes, likes, dislikes, and emotions or affective states than they are to ordinary beliefs. One's wanting a glass of water cannot be false, nor can one's dislike of olives, but one's belief about the number of chairs in the room certainly can be.⁴

We've already seen that realism entails cognitivism. However, the reverse is not true. It might be that we all have beliefs about what is and isn't beautiful, but that nothing *really is* beautiful, and so all of those beliefs are false. Such a view is called *error theory*. It is broadly analogous to atheism. The error theorist thinks that, in the same way that theistic thought and talk presuppose the existence of deities with certain properties, aesthetic thought and talk presuppose the existence of objects with real value properties like beauty. But just as the atheist thinks that deities don't exist, and that therefore our theistic beliefs are systematically false, the error theorist thinks that aesthetic properties don't exist, and that therefore our aesthetic beliefs are systematically false. So cognitivism does not entail realism.

Finally, noncognitivism entails antirealism. If our normative judgments cannot be truth-apt, then they cannot be right or wrong about how the world is. Our judgments might be beholden to other standards – they can *make sense* or *be appropriate*, but noncognitivism precludes their being *correct* or *true*, something realism is committed to. There are also hybrid cognitivist-noncognitivist views, which see the normative judgments in question as involving both a belief-like component and a desire-like component. The penultimate section will return to hybrid views and the realism-antirealism distinction, but we now have enough foundation to examine some of the exciting live debates.

² An important note about the usage of 'judgment': I will use this word for mental states that correspond to statements like "Acting callously is immoral," or "The sunset was beautiful." 'Judgment' is therefore neutral between cognitivism and noncognitivism in a way that 'belief' is not.

³ Although sophisticated, 'quasi-realist' versions of noncognitivism do try to accommodate truth-aptness.

⁴ See Scruton (1974) for a noteworthy presentation of aesthetic noncognitivism.

2. The Debates

This section will focus on four topics: disagreement, testimony, internalism, and strangeness. Though testimony gets a lot of attention in both aesthetics and metaethics, the other three topics are substantially more popular in metaethics. We will survey how they arise in the context of meta-aesthetics, paying special attention to what an aesthetic realist should say about them.

2.1 Disagreement

Aesthetic disagreements are ubiquitous. People disagree about how good, how beautiful, and how subtle or playful things are. But what does any of this say about meta-aesthetics?

On the one hand, disagreement supports cognitivism. Looking more closely at the phenomenon of disagreement, we find that the very fact that two people can disagree means that they each assert propositions, both of which cannot be correct. Suppose we are looking at the same landscape painting. I say, “This painting is beautiful,” and you say, “No, it isn’t beautiful.” Or perhaps I say that it is the best landscape by this painter, and you say the one next to it is better. In either case, it seems we have a disagreement; we cannot both be right. The painting cannot be both beautiful and not beautiful, or both better and worse than the one next to it. Of course, it can be better in one respect and worse in another, and if that is what we mean, then we can resolve this disagreement. But notice that even that assumes that there was an apparent disagreement that needed resolving, and that its resolution comes about when we agree about the respects in which one is better than the other. That is, we agree insofar as we both believe that this painting has superior composition, but that the one next to it has better use of color. But it seems we would disagree if I maintained that this painting had superior composition and you thought the one next to it did. As Peter Kivy (2015) argues, such genuine disagreements are not only possible, but actual and even frequent. They occur all the time in discussions about art.

Why does this support cognitivism? Parties to an aesthetic disagreement make incompatible claims about how things are. Compare a non-disagreement: If we are both in the gallery when they install the painting, and I cheer for it and you boo at it, we don’t have a disagreement. Neither of us asserts anything truth-apt. A cheer can’t be true, nor can a boo. I might then say to you, “I like this painting,” and you might say, “Well, I don’t like it.” Here, too, although we assert propositions, we say two things that can both be true, and so we aren’t having a disagreement. In contrast, if I say that the painting was made in 1735, and you say that it was made in 1738, we clearly do have a disagreement. We assert incompatible propositions and at least one of us (perhaps both of us) are wrong. If the cases in the previous paragraph constitute genuine disagreements, then we assert

incompatible propositions and cannot both be right. So the very possibility of disagreement in aesthetics supports cognitivism, at least about the statements that constitute the disagreement.

The most common replies to this argument involve either denying that these are genuine disagreements or else revising the definition of disagreement so that noncognitivism is compatible with it. To the first, suppose I say that the painting is large and you say that it isn't. Though it appears we have a disagreement, perhaps we find that we are using different standards for what counts as large. In that case, we had a merely apparent disagreement. Once we notice this, both our claims can be true because the painting can be large relative to one standard and not relative to another standard. The realist response is to maintain that disagreements can persist even when suitably clarified, as in the earlier example of clarifying the disagreement over which painting is better. The second avenue revises the definition of disagreement so that noncognitivists can explain it. This usually proceeds by saying that there *is* a kind of disagreement implicit in my cheering and your booing the painting, or in my liking and your not liking it. I won't get into these sophisticated attempts,⁵ but I will note that they involve giving up some of what seems intuitive about when we do and don't have disagreements.

Although Kivy argues for cognitivism, he does not argue for realism. Remember that cognitivism is consistent with error theory, according to which all aesthetic assessments are systematically false. And the disagreement argument itself makes no additional realist assumptions. Two parties to a disagreement can both be incorrect, as is implied in the disagreement about the year the painting was created. Similarly, if you say that ghosts are mean and I say that ghosts are kind, we are both wrong because there are no ghosts. In the former case, although we were both wrong, there was a possibility of getting it right; in the latter case, there's no way to get it right about what ghosts are like. Realists think that aesthetic disagreements are at least sometimes like the former kind, whereas error theorists think that aesthetic disagreements are all like disagreements about ghosts: we're trying to get it right about beauty, but there is no such thing.

Disagreement has also been used to argue directly against realism. In particular, realism seems to have trouble accommodating how widespread aesthetic disagreement is, even among people who are experts. There are two different arguments to this effect. On the first, the bare fact of widespread expert disagreement, where these experts are understood to be in equally good epistemic positions, suggests a disanalogy with classically realist domains of inquiry. In domains that we acknowledge as realist, the argument goes, we do not face widespread disagreement among experts or the generally well informed. People certainly do disagree about, for example, what Australia's capital city is or whether the earth is flat. However, in neither case is there widespread expert disagreement. People who have pretty good access to evidence and are equally well

⁵ See, e.g., Evers (2018).

informed will tend to converge in their judgments. Such people will tend to agree that Canberra is the capital and that the earth is round. But when it comes to aesthetic matters, we appear to face widespread expert disagreement: how good of a book Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* is, how good Kanye West's music is, how good Bob Ross's paintings are.

There are a few replies to this. One is that there is more convergence on aesthetic matters than this argument acknowledges. We can find contentious cases that provoke disagreement, but we can also find cases where experts are in near or even complete agreement: that *Citizen Kane* is a good movie, that *Beloved* is a good novel, that Japanese gardens are beautiful. Furthermore, we still find widespread expert disagreement in perfectly realist domains. Well-informed and competent mathematicians might disagree about whether a certain proof works. Well-informed and competent historians might disagree about the cause of a certain uprising. In reply, the antirealist might maintain that we have ways of resolving these questions, at least in principle, but that this doesn't hold in aesthetics. This reply, however, begs the question by assuming the aesthetic realist has no account of how to resolve disagreements.

To defend against this, the aesthetic realist needs to provide such an account. This doesn't look impossible. When we disagree with others about aesthetic matters, we often trade reasons. We point out trite narratives or underdeveloped characters; we point out musical innovation or formal complexity; we point out visual composition and fine brushstrokes. And we do seem to be able to convince others by bringing them to see or be aware of such things. In short, we seem to have some ways to resolve aesthetic disagreements, at least in principle.

A second, more insidious problem for realism posed by widespread disagreement is typically traced to Mackie (1977). It argues that the best explanation for widespread disagreement is something cultural or evolutionary, rather than any tracking of would-be aesthetic facts. We believe that certain things are beautiful, have artistic merit, and so on because it is to our cultural and economic advantage to believe that. Those with power and influence prize "good taste" and so we try to learn what good taste is, deploy it well, and reap the benefits. Take body aesthetics as an example: We are taught by those in power how to look at bodies and that certain bodies are more beautiful than others. We communicate to others that we endorse those standards, verbally and socially and even personally by trying to make our bodies conform to them. And we are rewarded if we succeed, which reinforces the whole system.

Notice that this problem actually does not require disagreement for its force. It could be that we all *agree*, but that the best explanation for our widespread agreement has nothing to do with the aesthetic facts. The point of such arguments, often called *debunking* arguments or *genealogical undermining* arguments, is that the best explanation of our disagreement or agreement – of why our aesthetic judgments are the way that they are – makes absolutely no reference to aesthetic facts. Compare our beliefs about the earth's shape. The best explanation for why we believe that the

earth is round makes reference to facts about its shape: we have evidence concerning its shape, including satellite images, time zones, astronomical observations. But we have believed that blue eyes are beautiful because those historically in power have had blue eyes. As it happens, this often comes up in the case of disagreement because we want to find out who is right. And, if this argument is correct, then nobody is right and it's all a social power game.

We can separate two versions of these arguments, one specific to aesthetics and one not. Some evolutionary arguments, such as Street (2006) and Joyce (2007), are mainly targeted at moral realism and may implicate epistemic normative realism too. Because these arguments are not a problem for aesthetic realism specifically, I won't discuss them in detail here.⁶ The cultural line in aesthetics is famously pushed by Pierre Bourdieu (1987), among others. Realists should defend themselves by arguing that we are not hopelessly boxed in by our cultural baggage. It often clouds our judgment about what is and isn't good, of course, just as ravenous hunger makes it hard to detect what's truly delicious. But we can make efforts to correct our cultural predispositions. In fact, the contemporary body positivity movement does just this, and it is not premised on the falseness of all beauty claims about the body. Instead, it often carries the slogan that all bodies are beautiful. In other words, there is beauty there, but culture has obscured our access to it. We should also take seriously those who disagree with us, that we might better understand their perspective. And we should re-evaluate our judgments if we find ourselves hewing too closely to upper-class tastes or assessing European art as better than everything else. Because we know who has historically been in power, we know in which directions prejudice will operate. On this view, we are admittedly boxed in but perhaps not without hope.

To take stock, we've seen three arguments from disagreement. The first argues that the possibility of genuine disagreement supports cognitivism. The second and third argue that the fact of widespread disagreement supports antirealism, and I have suggested realist replies to such arguments.

2.2 Testimony and Acquaintance

At bottom, the antirealist disagreement arguments concern the epistemology of aesthetic judgments. They doubt that we could reliably have access to aesthetic facts, even if they did exist. A further set of issues arises when thinking about the epistemology of aesthetic judgments, and these concern aesthetic testimony and the role of acquaintance in aesthetic knowledge.

The familiar debate examines whether we can get justified beliefs or knowledge through testimony concerning aesthetic matters, which I'll call *aesthetic testimony* for short. The nature of

⁶ See Vavova (2015) for a useful survey.

aesthetic testimony is thought to reveal many things: what it is aesthetically virtuous to do, whether there are aesthetic experts, or how central perception is to the formation of aesthetic judgments. In meta-aesthetics, it has an additional purpose as a potential diagnostic tool for aesthetic cognitivism and noncognitivism. Nonnormative testimony can quite clearly provide justification for beliefs, so that if a weather forecaster or someone standing outside says that it's raining, then we ordinarily have sufficient reason to believe that it's raining. We can form justified beliefs and even obtain knowledge this way. However, it has seemed to many that aesthetic testimony does not work this way. A friend or even well-regarded critic may say that Mexican architect Luis Barragán's Casa Gilardi is beautiful, but that can never give us justification for judging or believing that it is beautiful.

These observations about aesthetic testimony can seem best explained by noncognitivism.⁷ If aesthetic judgments are purely cognitive or representational, as they seem to be in the case of testimony about the rain, then we should be able to arrive at justified beliefs through aesthetic testimony. But it seems to many that we can't. Noncognitivism explains this by saying that aesthetic judgments are not belief-like; they are partially or wholly desire-like or affective. And affective or desire-like mental states cannot engage at a mere description of the beautiful thing or at a mere assertion of beauty. If I say that Casa Gilardi is vibrant, serene but playful, emotionally alive, or simply beautiful, those things cannot engage your affective states in the way that the noncognitivist thinks is requisite for forming an aesthetic judgment.

This is related to the well-known but controversial Acquaintance Principle. According to one version of this principle, we need firsthand experience of an object (i.e., acquaintance with it) to form a justified aesthetic judgment about it, and that is why aesthetic testimony can never provide justification. A stronger version claims that we need firsthand experience to form any aesthetic judgment about the object at all, and that is why aesthetic testimony can never provide justification.

Each version requires a different cognitivist response. The first version of the Acquaintance Principle is completely consistent with cognitivism. A cognitivist can concede that affective engagement and therefore firsthand experience are necessary for the justification of aesthetic judgments. But that only entails that acquaintance is necessary for justification, not that it is necessary for the truth of the aesthetic judgment. Compare a hypothetical case where firsthand perceptual acquaintance is requisite for being justified in one's color judgments. Testimony wouldn't give us justification for color judgments, so we would have to perceive the object ourselves to form a justified belief about its color. But that would not entail that the judgment thus justified is noncognitive.

⁷ On this issue, see Hopkins (2001), Todd (2004).

To this, the noncognitivist may redouble the attack. The fact that acquaintance and affect are necessary for our aesthetic judgments to be justified cries out for explanation. Why would this be true? Only the noncognitivist can offer a good explanation: because our aesthetic judgments are partly or wholly constituted by affective states. (Note that this is not strictly entailed by the stronger version of the Acquaintance Principle, but very closely allied to it.) Here, the cognitivist can either deny that acquaintance and affect are necessary for the justification of aesthetic judgments, and thus obviate the need for that explanation; or they can concede a limited version of this but deny that noncognitivism does indeed offer the best explanation of it.

In line with the first option, we can argue that it is our norms of aesthetic *assertion* that require acquaintance, not norms about the *justification* of our aesthetic judgments.⁸ On this view, I can't under normal circumstances assert that Casa Gilardi is beautiful if I haven't seen it. I instead have to say, "I've read that Casa Gilardi is beautiful," or "Casa Gilardi is supposed to be beautiful." But that doesn't undermine my having beliefs, even justified ones, regarding its beauty. And special circumstances or verbal cues might even allow me to say, "Casa Gilardi is beautiful, and I really hope to see it in person someday." If such utterances make sense, this suggests that we can form aesthetic judgments without acquaintance (e.g., via aesthetic testimony), but we have to be careful what we assert to others because normal aesthetic assertions carry a strong implication of acquaintance.

In keeping with the second option, we can admit that firsthand acquaintance is often, though not always, in fact required to arrive at justified beliefs. But the cognitivist explains this by pointing out that we often lack reasonably unequivocal and reliable aesthetic testimony (reliable in the sense that it issues from unimpeachably informed and sincere testifiers whose status as such we are *ourselves* able to discern). In other words, the quality of testimonial evidence in aesthetics is typically not very good, although it may occasionally be much better. As a result, acquaintance is often required to form a justified belief about the object in question. In cases where we have reasonably unequivocal reliable testimony, as with *Citizen Kane*, we can form justified beliefs. But such cases might be the exception rather than the rule. Notice, too, that nothing here is necessarily unique to aesthetics. It is generally true that it's rational to withhold from forming beliefs when there is rampant testimonial conflict and a lack of firsthand evidence. And in such cases, firsthand experience usually helps in the formation of justified beliefs – though it isn't guaranteed to, since one's firsthand evidence might also be indecisive. In their preferred explanation, the cognitivist just applies these general observations to aesthetic testimonial phenomena.⁹

A final dialectical note: These arguments assume that our aesthetic judgments *are* sometimes justified and examine whether testimony can provide justification. Because error theorists typically

⁸ See Robson (2015) for discussion.

⁹ See Meskin (2004) for a related deflationary strategy.

think that none of our aesthetic beliefs is justified, we can think of these arguments as interesting only to the noncognitivist and the realist cognitivist.

2.3 Internalism

Turning away from epistemological issues, we come to an influential metaethical topic concerning the psychology of moral judgments. This debate, like the first disagreement argument for cognitivism, is of interest to the realist and error theorist alike. A consideration that often motivates metaethical noncognitivism is that it usually seems like, when we make a normative judgment, our motivations are somehow activated. This thought is captured under the label *motivational internalism*. In the moral case, it says that if we sincerely judge that a certain action is the morally right one, then we are thereby at least a little bit motivated to perform that action. The problem for cognitivism is that, if beliefs are *purely* representational, they cannot as such engage our motivations or our affect in any way. To believe that it's a sunny day does not itself involve any motivation to go outside. One is only motivated to go outside if one wants to get vitamin D, get a tan, or feel the warm, fresh air. But those desires are all contingent. In contrast, the connection between moral beliefs and motivations does not seem contingent. Noncognitivism, the argument goes, has a much better explanation for internalism, since only noncognitivism presents the connection between moral judgments and motivations as being necessary.

Translated to aesthetics, the internalist holds that judging something to be aesthetically good necessarily entails having corresponding motivational or at least affective states like pleasure. If the entailed mental state is motivational, then we have a close parallel of the metaethical debate. If the state is instead something affective, then we have a thesis which we might call *affective internalism*. This makes for a looser parallel, but one that many will find better suited to aesthetics. And affective internalism will be very cleanly explained by a form of aesthetic noncognitivism that resembles strong aesthetic hedonism: the view that aesthetic judgments are partly or wholly constituted by the experience of pleasure.¹⁰ Both forms of internalism seem *prima facie* plausible. If I sincerely judge that *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is a beautiful album, aren't I thereby at least somewhat motivated to listen to it? If I sincerely judge that it is beautiful, aren't I thereby at least somewhat pleased by it? Answering yes to either question poses a problem for cognitivism.

Notice that a premise of this argument construes beliefs as purely representational and thus bridges internalism and noncognitivism. One style of reply denies this assumption. This view, often tacit because it is so widely accepted, is the *Humean belief-desire psychology*. According to the Humean, beliefs alone cannot motivate us; desires or something desire-like (potentially including

¹⁰ According to the taxonomy in Section 1, partial constitution views are technically hybrid cognitivist-noncognitivist views.

positive affect) is required for motivation. The cognitivist might deny this Humean view, and in doing so, make cognitivism perfectly compatible with internalism. But it will come at the expense of making cognitivism harder to characterize as distinct from a hybrid cognitivist-noncognitivist view. Fortunately, there are other options for those who prefer not to reject this popular psychological model.

A better strategy is to deny internalism as stated.¹¹ This can be done through counterexamples, and supplemented by offering a compelling cognitivist explanation of the residual correlation between aesthetic judgments and motivational or affective states. To provide counterexamples, notice first that not all positive aesthetic judgments are judgments of something's being beautiful. Aesthetic objects may be good because they are playful, sublime, tragic, or campy. If the staunch defender of 'beauty' as the most general term of aesthetic praise wants that concept to encompass all the others, we should at least bear that very clearly in mind when assessing what sounds natural to say or which examples seem plausible. Building on that, the cognitivist can argue that we often judge something to have positive aesthetic qualities without feeling any corresponding motivation or pleasure at all.¹² One might judge that conceptual artworks like Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* is a good artwork but have no desire to see it, or alternatively experience no pleasure in seeing it. Or one might recognize that punk music is very rich, interesting, and good, but just not like the sound of it and so not be at all motivated to listen to it, or again take no pleasure in listening. Or one might judge that Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog* is beautiful, but it is tragic (in a way that plausibly enhances its beauty), and so one might in many circumstances not be at all motivated to watch it. If one watches it, one might take no pleasure in the experience. These examples are made more plausible once we emphasize that beauty – at least narrowly understood – is not the only way for an artwork to be aesthetically valuable. Thus, even if motivation or pleasure is a frequent accompaniment to judgments of beauty, it is not a constant and conceptually necessary companion.

The second half of the reply acknowledges and offers some explanation for why motivation or pleasure is in fact a frequent companion to positive aesthetic assessments. A typical experience of beauty produces a belief (that of the object's being beautiful), but it also produces motivation or pleasure because we are usually motivated to pursue what we deem beautiful and usually take

¹¹ Notice that it won't do to respond by saying that we don't always act or intend in accordance with these motivations. All the internalist requires is that we are *at least somewhat* motivated, and it happens all the time that we are a little bit motivated to do things that we don't in fact do.

¹² For arguments against aesthetic motivational internalism, see Strandberg (2016), King (2018). Archer (2017) defends a weaker version of internalism that what I examine here, but holds that it does not conflict with cognitivism.

pleasure in the experience of beauty. This dual-effect view holds that the belief and motivation or pleasure are always in principle separable, even if they are often empirically co-occurrent.

There is a final, more conciliatory reply that works even if the counterexamples above are denied. It works operates along the lines of the earlier remarks on testimony. Maybe pleasure is always necessary for the justification of (positive) aesthetic judgments, but the judgment itself is still only a belief. This in effect endorses a weakened version of internalism. The noncognitivist's version says that, in judging something aesthetically good, we are *thereby* a bit motivated or pleased by it, but the weakened version says only that, when we judge something aesthetically good, we are *in fact always* a bit motivated or pleased by it. In other words, the former holds the judging itself to require motivation or pleasure, where the latter asserts only a perfect correlation between the two. If pleasure is necessary for the justification of our positive aesthetic judgments, then we have a plausible cognitivist explanation for why pleasure always appears alongside positive aesthetic assessments.

2.4 Strangeness

The final debate I'll touch on is a direct challenge to forms of realism. It concerns the metaphysical strangeness of aesthetic value properties and the epistemological strangeness of aesthetic knowledge on a realist view. Let's call this the *strangeness challenge* to realism.¹³

The strangeness challenge comes in two forms: metaphysical and epistemological. The metaphysical challenge is that, as J.L. Mackie puts it, "if there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe."¹⁴ In other words, if there were objective aesthetic values, they would be very strange things. Among objective aesthetic value properties are the balanced, the sublime, the dynamic, the playful, the beautiful, or the just plain (aesthetically) good. The realist thinks that such things exist, but what kind of a thing could these properties be? They don't have mass or extension, and they aren't empirical or physical properties. It seems like we can't use our normal methods to measure or test how much of them is present, the way we can test how much lead is in a water supply. Even in the case of the balanced, which contains a descriptive and measurable component (symmetry or compositional weight), the property still has some value "in it," so to speak. Therefore, if aesthetic goodness is a real property of things, that property has to be very different from all the other, more familiar properties that exist. This is a problem for the aesthetic realist.

¹³ A terminological note: Mackie's influential presentation uses the word 'queerness,' which the literature has to large extent followed, but which I will not follow.

¹⁴ Mackie, p. 38.

The epistemological challenge, as Mackie describes it, is that “if we were aware of [the objective values], it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”¹⁵ Where he talks about moral perception or intuition, we can substitute talk of aesthetic perception and intuition. Now, perhaps it’s not at all strange to imagine how we might know about aesthetic properties through perception: we see the balance. However, remember that we aren’t talking about purely descriptive aesthetic properties like symmetry (which we do know through perception), but value-laden properties like balance or beauty. We see colors and textures arranged in a certain way, but we don’t see beauty directly. We taste sourness and sweetness, but we don’t taste deliciousness. So, although we can perceive the descriptive components that go into balance or beauty or other value-laden aesthetic properties, it seems that we can’t directly *see* such properties, nor *taste* or *feel* or *hear* them. If they exist, how could we possibly know about them? In short, the metaphysical strangeness challenge is to explain how value properties can exist, and the epistemological strangeness challenge is to explain how we can know anything about them.

The strangeness challenge is in a way both the most serious and the least serious obstacle for the realist. Those struck by its power will think, “Golly, believing in value properties is like believing in ghosts or supernatural powers.” Those unfazed will think, “Yep, value properties are very different from other kinds of properties. So what?” Both responses are worth taking seriously.

The strength of the metaphysical challenge rests on its deployment of ontological parsimony. If we don’t have to posit a new type of entity (inherently value-laden properties), then we shouldn’t. Because this is a widely agreed-upon metaphysical principle, the challenge is quite powerful. However, the reply can then take more solid shape: the realist must argue that we *do* need to posit such entities. Defenders of this line of thought can move in several directions.

One is to argue that aesthetic properties simply are not strange. This brand of realism will take value-laden properties to be constituted by, grounded in, or identical to naturalistic properties, i.e., properties that are broadly compatible with a scientific worldview. Such a view faces the impressive but perhaps achievable task of fleshing out the details of how this view works. The next section of this essay examines one such prospect.

A second response is to rally other normative companions in guilt. It’s not just aesthetic properties, but other value-laden properties that we have to deny if we accept this line of argument. We have to deny moral properties and many epistemic properties, too, since normativity and value also find a home in epistemology.¹⁶ This reply may seem question-begging. Since the problem is that you have to posit the existence of strange properties, it doesn’t help to

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁶ The core epistemic concepts of rationality, reason, justification, knowledge, and even belief warmly invite normative or evaluative analysis.

posit *more* of them. However, if we understand the challenge as maintaining that we don't need to posit such entities, this reply argues that, well, we do need to. At least, we sacrifice a lot more than just aesthetic properties if we reject the existence of all value properties. And if we don't sacrifice moral and epistemic value properties, then there's no special reason to sacrifice the aesthetic ones.

Third, the realist can rally non-normative companions in guilt. Sometimes we do add entities to our working ontology. The realist can argue that whatever happens to a theory to make the addition of an entity to our ontology necessary is also present in this case. This is the strategy adopted by some moral realists to defend the existence of moral properties. They argue that, much as we are justified in positing scientific entities to explain all of the empirical phenomena we observe, so too we are justified in positing moral properties to explain all of the phenomena we observe. Injustice *causes* riots. Kindness *causes* people to help others. The aesthetic realist could attempt something analogous. Beauty causes pleasure. Good novels cause us to have insights. This is related to the first response, in that it argues that value properties may seem strange, but they are actually an ineliminable part of our best explanations of observable phenomena.

A fourth reply takes an offensive rather than defensive position. Perhaps Mackie's starting assumptions are flawed and stack the deck in the antirealist's favor. Take a different starting point. It is very hard to deny the existence of human consciousness. Indeed, consciousness can seem to be the only thing we really do experience directly. It is similarly hard to deny the existence of qualia – colors, sounds, and pain. It is comparatively easier to deny the existence of the external physical world, lead and water and all. Value-laden experience may be more like consciousness and qualia in that we have clearer and firmer access to it. Indeed, maybe our experience of beauty and playfulness and sublimity – and therefore their existence – is more certain than the existence of trees. The mistake was thinking that we needed something resembling a scientific, physicalistic vindication of aesthetic properties. This is a difficult line to push, but not an impossible one.

Last is the 'So what?' reply. Here, the realist simply bites the bullet. Value-laden properties, including aesthetic properties, *are* very strange – even in the technical, preferred sense of being different from other things. But the universe is a strange place. The human condition is strange. Consciousness is strange. Life is strange. Emotions and love and friendship are strange. Biology and physics and math are strange. Looking over this list, one wonders: Why should something's strangeness speak against its existence?

3. The Peculiar Role of Response-Dependence

So far, we have looked at realism, antirealism, cognitivism, and noncognitivism as largely exclusive and exhaustive categories. But certain popular meta-aesthetic theories sit uneasily along these divides. Response-dependence theories and hybrid cognitivist-noncognitivist theories may seem to

resist categorization, and thus resist analysis in the above taxonomy or even, optimistically, to evade the above problems. Alternatively, such theories risk being skewered on both sides of such arguments. Spelling out the details of such theories is therefore of the utmost importance.

This article has touched on hybrid cognitivist-noncognitivist theories throughout. Such theories hold that aesthetic judgments involve a belief component *and* a desire-like or affective component.¹⁷ These theories will resemble noncognitivism in that they will be able to endorse internalism, but they will not be able to fully endorse truth-aptness. After all, if it is unclear what it could be for a desire to be true, it will not become clearer if we say that a desire is a *component* of aesthetic judgment rather than the whole of it.¹⁸ The truth-aptness problem might be resolved by saying that the belief component of aesthetic judgment is sufficient for truth-aptness, but then the cognitivist and hybrid theorist appear to have only a terminological dispute over which mental state gets to be dubbed ‘aesthetic judgment’: is it the belief or the belief-plus-affect? The cognitivist is not committed to the existence of the latter, but it is perfectly compatible with cognitivism that such a state exists. Furthermore, if they endorse truth-aptness and moreover think that sometimes aesthetic judgments are *true*, hybrid theorists will have to face the strangeness challenge alongside realists because they too will have to offer an account of what makes the judgments true. They will also incur additional explanatory burdens. They must explain how the belief and non-belief components are related, why we should think of them as a single state, and why *both* components function in all the ways that the arguments above require.

Response-dependence theories are even more difficult to classify.¹⁹ At the simplest level, response-dependence about a property or set of properties is modeled on color. We perceive certain apples as red and thereby attribute redness to those apples. We maintain that they are red even though many people are red-green colorblind, even though many people see them under odd lighting, and even though people see them as some other color if hallucinating. Response-dependence theories in aesthetics more or less say that aesthetic properties are *like that*.

Aesthetic response-dependence most commonly takes the form of ideal observer theory, the Hume-inspired view that what makes something beautiful (or balanced or good) is that an ideal observer would have a certain response to it. Such views have the apparent advantages of being realist and being able to meet the strangeness challenge. Let’s look in slightly more detail at each of these advantages.

¹⁷ See Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).

¹⁸ Compare slurs, which combine descriptive and evaluative components. Are there truth-conditions for what makes someone a spinster? Are all unmarried women of marrying age spinsters? It’s a complex matter that isn’t obviously made easier by the presence of a descriptive component. (Feel free to substitute your least favorite slur to get the intuition more strongly.)

¹⁹ Influential presentations of aesthetic response-dependence theories are Hume (1777), McDowell (1985), and Wiggins (1998).

Whether such views count as realist depends crucially on how we characterize realism and how we characterize the particular response-dependence theory in question. I cannot hope to address this issue in all its complexity,²⁰ but we can get some idea of how this might work if we assess response-dependence according to the criteria given earlier in our characterization of realism. If we understand realism as involving a claim to the existence of facts, then we might say yes (after all, there are color facts). Insofar as realism includes our ability to get it right or wrong about those facts, then we can say yes, too (after all, we can get it wrong about colors). But if we understand realism as committed to mind-independence, then we may have to surrender (after all, colors aren't completely independent of our minds). This final verdict depends on how we define mind-independence, but regardless, mass seems mind-independent in a way that color does not. Perhaps this isn't a problem, though. Would it be so awful if aesthetic value were as real as color, but not as real as mass? Response-dependence modeled on color thus captures the intuitive thought, if unhappily vague, that we should be realists – but only of a relatively mild sort – about aesthetic value.

What of the other advantage, the ability of response-dependence to meet the strangeness challenge? On its face, this seems trivially easy. What makes the apple red is that suitably placed observers would perceive it in a certain way. One version of response-dependence is modeled on this, saying that what makes something beautiful is just that observers would respond to it in a certain way (with pleasure or a special kind of feeling). This account analyzes aesthetic value properties in purely descriptive terms – in terms of what would in fact produce certain responses under certain descriptively specifiable conditions. For color properties, it just is the case that suitably placed observers would respond in certain ways, and that's what makes something the color it is. So too with beauty, the proposal goes. If beauty works just like color, then there's nothing strange about it.²¹

However, it then becomes difficult to explain the *value* of aesthetic value and why it seems like we *should* respond in certain ways to balance or beauty.²² Notice that response-dependence about color does not try to explain why we should respond in a certain way to redness. If someone is under odd lighting conditions and sees the red apple as yellow, we don't think that they should see it as red or that they have any reason to get into the right lighting conditions to see it as red. In contrast, if I'm not in the right viewing or experiential conditions to have the beauty-response to an aesthetic object, we generally think I should get into the right conditions so that I can appreciate its

²⁰ What constitutes realism is a matter of much debate; I've only given a very rough approximation here. For more on whether response-dependence is compatible with realism, see Pettit (1991).

²¹ For more on response-dependence theories, see Watkins and Shelley (2012), Hanson (forthcoming), and King (forthcoming).

²² See Levinson (2002), Shelley (2011).

beauty. Such response-dependence theorists fundamentally lack an account of what makes aesthetic value worth pursuing or promoting. Think of this as the reverse side of the strangeness challenge: the current version of response-dependence does not make value strange *enough* or sufficiently *different* from regular empirical properties. This view makes it unclear how aesthetic value is valuable or worth pursuing at all.²³ In noticing this, we should ask whether this view is truly a version of realism. On this view, it is unclear if any aesthetic *value* gets to be real, or if such accounts render it value in name only.

4. Conclusion

This article has covered four central debates in metaethics and meta-aesthetics. We have seen disagreement used to defend cognitivism and to undermine realism. We have seen testimony and internalism used to defend noncognitivism. And we have seen a strangeness challenge to realists. I have made suggestions throughout for how the realist might deflect some of these worries. I hope it is now clear that aesthetic realism need not be a free-for-all where opinions become reality. None of this is meant to suggest that – even if the gestural and controversial defenses of realism I’ve offered work out – realists are home free. Many more obstacles await them. But many more obstacles await any meta-aesthetic theory. And this is as it should be for a burgeoning area in which there is still much fruitful work to be done.

²³ An alternative response-dependence approach analyzes aesthetic value properties using normative terms – in terms of what *should* produce certain responses under certain conditions. One *should* feel certain feelings in response to the beautiful. This signifies a slight but important departure from the parallel with color properties. Such views can more easily explain value and normativity and are perfectly compatible with realism, but will not meet the strangeness challenge. See D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) and Gorodeisky (2021).

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