

Normative-to-Normative Reductionism and the Case of Aesthetics

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Abstract: Reductionisms are everywhere in philosophy, but surprisingly little has been said in any systematic way about reductions of some normative phenomena to other normative phenomena. This chapter aims to make some headway on that project. I call such reductions normative-to-normative reductions, and I assess some of the prospects and problems for those normative-to-normative reductions that aim to reduce an entire domain of normativity to some other domain. In doing so, the chapter argues against views that reduce the aesthetic to some other domain, including pleasure, prudence, desire, and social practices. This chapter also examines and classifies the argumentative strategies deployed and compares those to existing debates about other normative-to-normative reductionisms, including epistemic instrumentalism. It ends with an extended discussion of whether the reductionist view loses the distinctiveness of the reduced domain. This raises larger questions about what's at stake in choosing between reductionism and eliminativism and how we individuate normative domains.

Keywords: reductionism, eliminativism, normative domains, aesthetics, epistemic instrumentalism, pleasure, prudence, practices

I. Normative-to-normative reductions

A *normative-to-normative reduction* is a reduction of some set of normative facts to some other set of normative facts. It is, moreover, the claim that some set of normative facts bears a very tight metaphysical relation to some other set of normative facts. The former set, for example, is grounded in, is constituted by, is fundamentally (just), is defined by, realizes, or is nothing above and beyond that other set of facts. For the sake of terminological tidiness, I'll call the former the set of *reduced*

facts and the latter (the facts in) the *reduction base*. I'll also talk of the former set *consisting in* or *obtaining in virtue of* the latter, but I mean these locutions to be neutral among the different options.

Reductions so understood have a few key features. First, they relate *facts* to each other. Understanding the relata as facts gives the reductionist more leeway to talk very generally. To reduce, for instance, moral rightness as a property of actions would require the reduction base also to be properties of actions, such as that they maximize overall well-being. But reducing facts about moral rightness leaves open a number of different types of reduction base – facts about mutually beneficial self-interest, facts about rational agency, or (as before) facts about the maximization of overall well-being. Second, reductions are importantly *asymmetrical*. This is why identity is not the best way to characterize reductionism. Identity is symmetrical, but reduction is clearly not.¹ Finally, reductions are *explanatory*. There is supposed to be something theoretically clarifying or simplifying about understanding the reduced facts in terms of the reduction base, perhaps because the reduction base forms a broader genus or is of a more metaphysically fundamental kind.

Take as an example epistemic instrumentalism, the view that epistemic norms are a species of instrumental practical norms. Roughly, this is the view that facts about what we epistemically ought to believe obtain in virtue of our goals (say, because those goals would be served by our believing certain things or believing in certain ways).² This is an epistemic-to-practical reductionist view – or, if you like, an epistemic-to-instrumental practical reductionist view. It is an instance of what I will call an *inter-domain reduction*, one that aims to reduce an entire normative domain to some other normative domain. These will be the central focus of this paper, but there are also *intra-domain reductions* that seek to reduce one set of normative facts within a particular domain – say, the moral – to a different set of normative facts in that same domain. Classic debates about the right and the good ask whether the morally right or the morally good is fundamental. If the right can be cast entirely in axiological terms and the reverse is not true, then the good is fundamental. If instead the good can be cast entirely in deontic terms and the reverse is not true, then the right is fundamental. For each proposed reduction, there is a corresponding non-reductionist position which sees the allegedly reducible normative facts as irreducible or *sui generis*.

¹ See Schroeder 2007 (pp. 63-64) for more on this.

² See Worsnip (forthcoming) for a helpful overview.

Normative-to-normative reductions are typically motivated by two central concerns.³ The first is a desire for normative parsimony. For example, our normative calculations would be significantly tidier if reasons were a common denominator across all of normativity. The second is a desire for naturalism along with the thought that the proposed reduction base is more amenable to naturalism. If reasons can be naturalized and duty or goodness cannot (directly), then it would be very nice for the naturalist if duty and goodness reduced to reasons.

Take again the epistemic instrumentalist. These reductionists are attracted to a parsimonious view of normativity that doesn't split the theoretical from the practical. They also often harbor naturalist aspirations and believe that instrumental practical norms are easier to naturalize than epistemic norms as such. The normative reduction base, in this case instrumental practical normativity, thus forms a bridge between the natural world and the hard-to-naturalize epistemic norms.

But these two motivations are separable, and one needn't be a naturalist to find the normative-to-normative reduction appealing. Some reductionists have no interest in naturalism (e.g., T.M. Scanlon's reasons fundamentalism, or Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen's epistemic instrumentalism). Still, many do: constitutivists who characterize norms for action in terms of what our own agency presupposes or commits us to, Aristotelians who characterize the moral in terms of good human function, or response-dependence theorists who characterize value in terms of idealized human dispositions.

A third and final class of motivations is more local to the debate in question. For example, a consequentialist may be motivated to defend a value-first rather than a reasons-first or fittingness-first account because it is more suited to their view. Or someone who already has an account of instrumental practical reasoning may favor epistemic instrumentalism. Unlike the first two motivations, this doesn't correspond to a general advantage of reductionism. The precise advantage obtained will vary with the particulars of the target reduction. Such local motivations are often present, sometimes only implicitly but sometimes very explicitly.

For how pervasive and central to normative and meta-normative theorizing they are, there has been surprisingly little systematic discussion of normative-to-normative reductions. Explicit discussions of reduction are very often about reduction as it concerns physical properties, mental events, scientific theories, or the normative vis-à-vis the natural. I suspect this is in part because it is

³ See Schroeder 2005, Smith 2018, and Steglich-Petersen 2018 for discussion of these motivations as they arise in particular arenas.

difficult to say much at the very general level about normative-to-normative reductions. Much of the promise (or threat) of reductionism lies in the details of the proposed reduction. Still, there are things to learn if we examine such reductions with an eye to their general features.

I'll proceed by using a concrete case to highlight and examine general features of reductions and anti-reductionist arguments. I will examine theories that reduce facts about aesthetic normativity to facts about some other normative domain. I choose this case because it is the one that I know best, but also because it is one for which reductionisms have not been discussed in much explicit detail, despite the fact that orthodox views are reductionist or something like it. In Section II, I'll argue against four forms of aesthetic reductionism, but one need not agree with my anti-reductionist arguments – or even have any horse in the aesthetic reductionism race – to appreciate the lessons about inter-domain reductions. Those interested only in the upshots for metaethics and metanormativity will, I hope, still find plenty that is worth their while, especially in the general comments that close each sub-section. Section III will return to normative-to-normative reductions in general, paying special attention to the specter of eliminativism and the individuation of normative domains. A theme of the paper is that it is very challenging to spell out what a normative domain is, but that doing so is crucial to understanding reductionism, and Section IV draws out the implications of this for future work in normativity.

II. Aesthetic Reductionism

There is a fair amount of skepticism about aesthetics as a *sui generis* domain of normativity. The prevailing tendency, which I will call *aesthetic reductionism*, is to reduce facts about aesthetic normativity to facts about some other type of normativity, where the commonest candidates involve pleasure, prudence, desires, and practices.

Of course, for something to be an inter-domain reduction, the reduction base has to be normative. But some of these candidates, for example, facts about pleasure or facts about what people desire, do not themselves appear to be normative. Whether or not we experience pleasure or desire something is plainly a descriptive fact. As a result, views on which aesthetic normativity is reducible to what brings pleasure or what is desired might instead be direct naturalistic reductions rather than normative-to-normative reductions. This worry raises a theme that will recur throughout this paper: it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to specify what, precisely, a normative domain is. It

is difficult both to demarcate the domain – setting out precisely where one domain ends and another begins – but also to specify when a domain counts as normative.

Take hedonic normativity. This seems clearly to be a normative domain. It's the normativity that attends pleasure (or the pleasurable), what value pleasure has, what reason we have for pursuing it by virtue of its having the hedonic tone or distinctive phenomenology that it does. However, its normativity arguably rests entirely on the substantive assumption that pleasure is *valuable*, that we do have *reason* to pursue it, and (one might think) it's really the attendant value or reasons that are normative, not the pleasure. In other words, if the reduction base consists of facts of a certain kind, a question we might ask is: Does the reduction base contain only descriptive facts about what brings pleasure? Or does it contain facts about, say, when we have *reason* to pursue pleasure? If the former, then it looks like a naturalistic reduction. If the latter, then it is a normative-to-normative reduction, but then hedonic normativity looks very cheap. If we can generate a normative domain for pleasure in this way, then we can generate normative domains willy-nilly. Dessert normativity: the value of dessert; Pokémon normativity: the reasons we have to catch 'em all.

I propose that we remedy this for now by distinguishing *intrinsically* normative domains from what we might call *extrinsically* normative domains. Intrinsically normative domains are domains whose core, generative concept (pleasure, epistemic rationality, dessert, or Pokémon) is normative. Epistemic rationality seems to generate an intrinsically normative domain because the concept of epistemic rationality is a normative one. Pokémon does not, which is why Pokémon normativity rests on our stipulated reason to catch 'em all. It's an open question whether aesthetics produces an intrinsically normative domain in this sense, and I take it to be an open question whether pleasure does. One might think that pleasure is entirely descriptive: a measurable physiological phenomenon. In this case, hedonic normativity would be, like Pokémon normativity, an extrinsically normative domain. But one might think that pleasure is a normative concept, and that we don't really understand pleasure unless we understand its worthiness to be pursued. In this case, hedonic normativity would be intrinsically normative domain.

We will return to these matters in the final section, but a few things are worth flagging for now. It is difficult to specify exactly what a normative domain is in part because it's hard to say when a domain is normative. Distinguishing intrinsically from extrinsically normative domains can help us get a more precise grasp on what it is that we are talking about. For all I've said, it might turn out that extrinsically normative domains don't really deserve to be called normative domains, in which case some of these proposed reductions aren't actually normative-to-normative reductions.

Still, I'll use the terminology of extrinsic normativity to not presume answers to such questions. Acknowledging that some domains are extrinsically normative does not undermine the structure of the reductionist issues at hand. There are well-formed questions – albeit uninteresting ones – about whether dessert normativity reduces to Pokémon normativity (it doesn't), and whether aesthetic normativity reduces to dessert normativity (also no). Readers inclined to understand pleasure and desire as extrinsically normative can take the corresponding proposals as interesting versions of that kind of question.

Let's turn back to the central concern. If true, aesthetic reductionism would have at least three important upshots. First and most obviously, aesthetics would not be a *sui generis* normative domain. There would not be distinctively aesthetic values or fundamentally aesthetic reasons. Aesthetic reasons would ultimately be reasons to promote our own pleasure or well-being, to fulfill our desires, or to participate in a practice. Second, if the reduction base is naturalistic or naturalizable, then so too is aesthetic normativity. Third, aesthetics would enjoy (only) whatever type of normativity the reduction base enjoys. If, for example, aesthetic value is ultimately grounded in practices, and practices are merely formally rather than authoritatively normative, then aesthetics is also merely formally normative.

Though it's rarely voiced, surely what motivates the aesthetic reductionist are the concerns we saw above. It offers a more parsimonious vision of normativity, and naturalistic aspirations are evident across the common candidates. There is also a further, more local motivation in this case that makes aesthetics especially susceptible to reductionism, and it sets up a dialectical thread that will take us through all four versions of aesthetic reductionism. That thread begins with the thought that normative aesthetic facts seem intimately tied up with what gives us pleasure.

II.A. Aesthetics and Pleasure

Prominent Kantian theories characterize aesthetic judgment, including aesthetic appreciation, as necessarily involving disinterested pleasure, pleasure that does not depend on an aim or interest of ours.⁴ The art dealer who takes pleasure in a painting because she sees it as a great investment does not experience disinterested pleasure, whereas the art dealer who sets all of those interests aside and looks at the painting itself can truly appreciate it. Such theories often take this as an account of

⁴ See, e.g., Kant 1790/2000, Beardsley 1982, Mothersill 1984, Levinson 2002, Matthen 2017, 2018, Gorodeisky 2021.

aesthetic experience in general, rather than as a view about aesthetic judgment per se. On these views, all aesthetic experience – if genuinely *aesthetic* – consists in experiences of disinterested pleasure (or displeasure, if the aesthetic experience is a bad one).

This looks like a good basis for defending reductionism: First, aesthetic experience and appreciation consist in disinterested pleasure. Therefore, facts about aesthetic normativity must consist in facts about the normativity of disinterested pleasure. A second step allows that there's nothing normatively special about disinterested pleasure, that facts about its normativity further consist in facts about *hedonic normativity*, the normativity of pleasure in general. Pleasure is good and we have reason to pursue it, and nothing is different or special about disinterested pleasure. Putting these two together, we get a reduction of aesthetic normativity to hedonic normativity. On this view, why should you read or appreciate a great novel? Because doing so will bring you (disinterested) pleasure.

In this way, the historically popular Kantian view can be rallied in support of a normative-to-normative, inter-domain reductionism. But this view is ultimately unsatisfactory, and there are two broad reasons why. First, the identification of aesthetic experience with disinterested pleasure doesn't seem right. Second, it's doubtful that aesthetics owes its normative status entirely to pleasure. Let's turn to each in more detail.

There are problems with identifying aesthetic experience with disinterested pleasure on both the “disinterested” front and the “pleasure” front. Contra disinterestedness, an enormous amount of good art and valuable aesthetic phenomena essentially involve interestedness on the part of the audience. Think of the value we find in political art or applied arts like architecture, industrial design, and fashion. These are often very much interested in ways that not only fail to undermine our reasons for appreciating them, but in some cases enhance them. (A stronger version of this worry has it that disinterest in the preferred sense does not even exist. The “disinterested” perspective is one that does not have *certain* interests, but no perspective can be devoid of all interest.⁵ If there is no such thing as truly disinterested pleasure, then clearly a reduction to disinterested pleasure fails.)

Contra pleasure, many works worthy of appreciation are those which deliver hard and unpleasant truths, maybe from a perspective we were unfamiliar with or didn't entirely understand. And there are many other non-pleasurable or even unpleasurable – yet evidently valuable – aesthetic experiences to be had from engagement with tragedies, difficult novels, ugly but provocative art, and

⁵ See for example Peg Brand's (1998) critique of disinterest as an Enlightenment fiction.

cacophonous music.⁶ Arguably, none of these experiences is pleasurable – and in many instances, their unpleasurability is part of the point.⁷

A final worry is that such theories unduly emphasize the reactive, passive nature of aesthetic life. They focus on aesthetic judgment, appreciation, or experience at the expense of aesthetic activity, which can appear in artistic creation and creativity, in actively engaged audiences, and a whole range of things in between. Such theories falter when extended to these aesthetic phenomena. It isn't even *prima facie* plausible that artistic creativity or actively attending and interpreting an artwork consists in disinterested pleasure; they're much more complex processes than that.

In short, aesthetic-to-hedonic reductionism doesn't look especially promising because disinterested pleasure is insufficiently coextensive with aesthetic experience and with our full range of aesthetic activities. The tight metaphysical relationship that the reductionist needs to exist between facts about aesthetic normativity and facts about hedonic normativity requires, *inter alia*, that one be present whenever the other is, and so far, we don't even have this much.

However, suppose that (positive) aesthetic experience did consist in disinterested pleasure. Would aesthetic normativity then reduce to hedonic normativity? Not necessarily. But this entailment does not hold for reasons that are familiar from moral theory. Suppose that, for certain people, doing something morally praiseworthy always or even necessarily brings them pleasure. This is very different from claiming that the ultimate reason for them to do something morally praiseworthy is for the pleasure it brings. By comparison, even if disinterested pleasure is always present whenever we have a positive aesthetic experience, that does not demonstrate the further normative claim that pleasure is what justifies our experience or makes it appropriate. The aesthetic-to-hedonic reductionist mistakenly assumes that aesthetic normativity must consist in the normativity of disinterested pleasure just because aesthetic experience consists in disinterested pleasure. Once we notice this illicit step in the argument, we can capture more vividly the second broad reason for denying this form of reductionism, i.e., that it is doubtful that aesthetics owes its normativity entirely to pleasure.

Accepting the normative reduction entails the fungibility of aesthetic objects.⁸ If our reasons for appreciating a given poem were just a matter of accumulating pleasure, then we should have not

⁶ Aaron Smuts (2011), for example, argues that we listen to sad songs *precisely* in order to more keenly feel our sadness.

⁷ For an overview of such views and the surrounding debates, see Van der Berg 2020.

⁸ This worry is most helpfully developed by James Shelley (2010), who calls the problematic implication "the separability of value." Much of this section is aimed at precisifying and fleshing out Shelley's worry.

only the same *amount* or strength of reason(s) for appreciating two equally pleasurable aesthetic objects, but *the very same reason* for appreciating them. But we tend to think of aesthetic norms as not working this way. Two poems, equal in their pleasure output, are not thereby appreciable on the very same grounds or to the same degree. Certain features make *this* poem worth appreciating, and others make *that* poem worth appreciating. The poems – like people – are not simply tradeable for one another. But if we locate the reason for engaging with them in the pleasure they produce, we must accept this fundamental fungibility.

Or suppose that there were different amounts of pleasure to be had from two different poems. One would make you quite sad, though it might give you some pleasure through a life lesson you'd be left with. Another would make you feel a good deal of pleasure the whole way through, and would teach you some pleasurable-to-learn life lesson to boot. If aesthetic normativity reduced to hedonic normativity, then there would be less reason to read the former poem. But this does not map onto our natural thinking about such cases. Intuitively, we have comparable aesthetic reason to read both poems, though we have more hedonic reason to read the latter. This natural thought is also incompatible with the reductionist view at hand.

And though I've framed this fungibility argument in terms of reasons, we could sharpen the worry by framing it in terms of value: if aesthetic normativity is just hedonic normativity, then we are compelled to say that the aesthetic *value* of the poems consists in hedonic normative facts, e.g., facts about the poems' hedonic value (their ability to generate pleasure). The less hedonically valuable poem is, ipso facto, a less aesthetically valuable poem. Whatever else we believe, this is surely a very foreign way of thinking about aesthetic value.

The above arguments encapsulate general strategies for arguing against normative-to-normative reductionisms. First, the reduced facts don't always travel together with facts in the reduction base, but the reduction needs this to get off the ground. This is a popular anti-reductionist strategy, available to any sort of anti-reductionist. In our case, it appears that we can have positive aesthetic experiences without disinterested pleasure. Compare the zombie argument against reductionist physicalism in the philosophy of mind. It is possible that a creature could exist who is physically identical to a person but has no mind or consciousness. Thus, the argument goes, the physical and the mental are insufficiently coextensive (at least conceptually). Or compare an argument Thomas Kelly offers against epistemic instrumentalism. He writes, "The attempt to assimilate epistemic rationality to instrumental rationality founders on the fact that one can have epistemic reasons to believe propositions even in cases in which it is clear that one's believing those

propositions holds no promise of advancing any goal which one actually possesses.”⁹ In other words, the reductionist needs facts about our epistemic reasons to appear alongside facts about our goals – but they do not.

Second, even if the facts are coextensive, the normative-to-normative anti-reductionist may yet resist. Perhaps the requisite reasons and values travel together, but that does not entail that one set of reasons or values reduces to the other. This is a less frequent anti-reductionist argument, in part because it relies on special features of the normative. Any anti-reductionist can argue against reductions by pointing out that the reduced phenomena and the reduction base are insufficiently coextensive. But only normative-to-normative anti-reductionists can employ this second strategy. Versions of this strategy might look to (1) the overcounting or undercounting of reasons, (2) to differential strength of the different reasons,¹⁰ or (3) directly to the irreducibility of the reasons or values at stake – with an emphasis on their irreducibility *as normative entities*.

For example, the fungibility argument above deploys (2) and (3). It claims that the strength of the reasons we have to read two different but equally pleasure-producing poems could be different. It also claims that the aesthetic reasons to appreciate two equally pleasure-producing objects are not themselves pleasure-based reasons.

We asked earlier why you should read or appreciate a great novel. For those still taken with the idea that pleasure plays some central role in that answer, if not as the key feature of the reduction base, there are two options. Maybe pleasure contributes to your well-being, so that even if pleasure isn’t always or necessarily present in all positive aesthetic experiences, it is still a clue to what is going on. Or maybe we in fact always desire pleasure. Each option yields a further form of reductionism: that facts about aesthetic normativity reduce to facts about prudential normativity, or that they reduce to facts about desire-based normativity. In either case, pleasure becomes a

⁹ Kelly 2003: 630.

¹⁰ Note that (1) and (2) are related to but slightly distinct from what Schroeder 2007 calls the Too Many Reasons and Too Few Reasons objections, and the Proportionalism objection. They are distinct in that Schroeder frames the objections as objections to the *naturalistic reduction of reasons to desires*. According to the Too Many and Too Few Reasons objections, the naturalistic reduction over- and undercounts reasons. But the present framing is different. Put into Schroeder’s context, it would be the worry that the *other* step of his reductionist project – the reasons-first part – generates Too Many and Too Few Reasons. Schroeder brushes against this when, in discussing the Too Few Reasons objection, he attempts to capture why we have reasons (connected to our desires) to do what is moral. But his aim is to explain why our reasons are captured by our desires, *not* why our moral duties, values, and reasons are ultimately practical reasons. Or, if his aim is the latter, then it seems to me he is insufficiently careful in distinguishing the two steps of his two-step reduction (see 79-81).

superfluous middleman. In jettisoning that intermediary, such accounts are not only more parsimonious but potentially more powerful, given existing worries for Kantian hedonic theories.

II.B. *Aesthetics and Well-Being*

Many of the counterexamples to hedonic reductionism rely on the thought that responsiveness to aesthetic reasons does in fact promote our well-being, even if not our pleasure. Furthermore, if we ask why aesthetics actually seems important, we might plausibly answer that it contributes to a full life or a life that goes well, which may but need not operate via pleasure. It would be easy to have a view of individual well-being according to which non-pleasurable aesthetic experiences are part of what makes a life go well. Views on which aesthetic reasons are a variety of prudential reasons also enjoy historical precedence. Many arguments for art appreciation and public art rest on the idea that aesthetic experience and appreciation enrich our lives, enlarge our moral perspectives, and deepen our understanding of the human condition.

As with disinterested pleasure, we can break up anti-reductionist arguments into two classes: first, positive aesthetic experiences do not always improve well-being; second, even granting that they do, facts about aesthetic normativity do not consist in facts about prudential normativity. Let's turn to the first.

The above discussion of hedonism makes prudential views more attractive by comparison. A melancholic response to a sad song may not be pleasurable, but experiencing melancholia now and then does seem to enrich our lives in a variety of ways. However, while having a positive aesthetic experience in response to an aesthetic object often promotes well-being, this is not always the case. To take only one example, if one is already suffering from severe depression, having a melancholic response to a sad song – while aesthetically appropriate – is clearly not conducive to one's well-being. And things can get darker still. Our lives can themselves be experienced and lived as aesthetic narratives. But the aesthetically best life narrative is by no means always the prudentially best one. Tragedies can be beautiful to watch, but they are horrible to live.

Furthermore, artists are notorious for sacrificing their own well-being for the sake of their art. Characters like this – a variant on the tortured artist trope – abound in fictions. Think of the ballerina who sacrifices her own physical and mental well-being for the betterment of her art (as in Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*). Or the jazz musician who sacrifices his health, happiness, and relationships for his craft (as in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*). They also abound in real life, though

these cases are inevitably more complicated. As with any field, a certain monomania can lead to enormous success, but that success is often purchased at the expense of one's overall well-being. And though it would be a wild exaggeration to say that all artists conform to it, this model is neither unfamiliar nor unrealistic.

We can even imagine over-enthusiastic art consumers (or aesthetic experience consumers) who sacrifice relationships to watch more movies and read more books, sacrifice health to consume more food and drink, or sacrifice careers to experience a wide variety of breathtaking landscapes. Moving again to darker cases, we can imagine people struggling with their mental health who pursue aesthetic experiences that worsen rather than improve their condition, or who avoid medication and treatment in favor of aesthetic intensity. All of these people have the appropriate aesthetic experience, but that experience robs them of well-being.

If we assume that aesthetic normativity reduces to prudential normativity, then we must understand these cases as ones where reasons to feel melancholic, live tragic lives, pursue ballet, watch movies, and so on are ultimately prudential reasons. We have such reasons only insofar as these pursuits promote our well-being. But many such pursuits simply do not promote our well-being. A possible reply could attempt to recast these cases as trade-offs between different factors on an objective list of contributors to well-being: being a great artist promotes my well-being, but so does being healthy. This is a hard view to argue against because, as Mark Schroeder points out,¹¹ our intuitions about when we have *no* reasons are somewhat unreliable. Still, I think this is a decreasingly plausible line to take if we bear in mind cases like those above. It's not plausible that being a great artist really does promote my well-being if it causes me significant ill health and mental anguish. At least, defending such a view requires some bullet biting.

Another reductionist reply takes a different tack, maintaining that when such aesthetic pursuits fail to promote our well-being, they fail to give us any reason or to be valuable at all. But this just doesn't seem to get the phenomena right. These pursuits are aesthetically valuable ones, even if they aren't prudentially valuable. The depressed person has *some* reason to have a melancholic response even if we assume that it wouldn't contribute to their well-being in the slightest. The ballerina likewise has *some* reason to pursue excellence. It's just that those reasons may very well not suffice to justify such gutting sacrifices of well-being.

¹¹ Schroeder 2007, 92ff.

So aesthetic experiences, appreciation, and activities do not always or necessarily promote well-being. But even supposing that we are lucky enough to live in a world where our aesthetic and prudential normativity always dovetail, we must ask whether the aesthetic values and reasons owe their normative status entirely to well-being. Here, we have recourse to parallel concerns as earlier.

The most frequently cited reason to eat broccoli is that it contributes to one's health and therefore to one's well-being. And we have the same strength of reason – indeed the very same reason – to eat anything with comparable nutritional benefits. But this does not seem to be the case with all things. If, for instance, the reason for having a friend or a partner were because it contributed to one's well-being, then we should 'trade up' to any friend or partner who would offer an increase in well-being. But the implication that people are tradeable or fungible goods in this way is a familiar obstacle for such views.

But on the present aesthetic-to-prudential reductionism, we should appreciate a poem insofar as it will increase our well-being. So, as before, we have two counterintuitive consequences. First, we have equally strong reasons for appreciating two equally well-being-producing aesthetic objects, regardless of their quality, content, originality, and so on. Second, we have to say that the aesthetic reason consists in the prudential reason, and in doing so we eliminate any particularity having to do with the aesthetic objects or experiences themselves.¹² As before, this doesn't seem right. Certain reasons make *this* poem worth appreciating, and other things make *that* poem worth appreciating. And though they both produce well-being, the poems are not tradeable for one another. But when we locate the reason for engaging with them in the well-being they produce, we make poems, artworks, and any other aesthetic objects fundamentally fungible. They become more like broccoli and less like people.

More plausibly, well-being – like pleasure – is at best a symptom of experiencing certain aesthetic objects, not what gives us reason to do so. Our experiences of the beautiful, the sublime, the cute, and all the rest are not justified *only insofar as* they make our lives go better; rather, a more intuitive explanation holds that they are justified insofar as they are appropriate to or fit their objects, and whether they fit their objects is determined by various properties of those objects.

Exactly parallel worries arise for aesthetic-to-prudential reductionism as for aesthetic-to-hedonic reductionism. Here, too, we see two broad anti-reductionist strategies. One, available to any

¹² This is not a completely foreign thought. Compare Susan Wolf, who writes, "If what made good art valuable was the fact that we were capable of benefiting from it, it would seem to follow that *how* valuable a work of art is would be a function of how much benefit it could potentially yield" (2010: 54).

anti-reductionist, argues that the reduced phenomena can exist without the reduction base. In this case, aesthetic appreciation and valuable aesthetic pursuits do not always increase well-being. The other, only available to normative-to-normative anti-reductionists, argues that the aesthetic reasons themselves are not necessarily of the same strength as, nor do they simply consist in, prudential reasons.

II.C. Aesthetics and Desire

The last hope for those who want to keep pleasure somehow central to aesthetic normativity is to offer a reduction of facts about aesthetic normativity to facts about desire-based normativity, the normativity of desires (or goals, aims, projects, etc.). We could alternatively call this a kind of instrumental practical normativity, since it concerns the reasons we have to satisfy our desires or whatever ends we happen to take up. Notice that this is the epistemic instrumentalist's reduction base, too, so the aesthetic-to-desire reductionist would have plenty of company. Furthermore, as with pleasure, we can ask whether this reduction base is intrinsically or extrinsically normative. On one hand, whether or not one has a certain desire or goal is a descriptive psychological matter, and so it looks to generate an extrinsically normative domain. On the other, one might think that desires or goals are themselves normative concepts, in that they build in standards or conditions of satisfaction. Or one might think that the proper concept to be employed in this reduction base is not desires or goals per se, but instrumental practical rationality. In either case, desire-based normativity would be an intrinsically normative domain.

On such a view, we may desire a certain sort of experience (an aesthetic one) or desire to promote a certain sort of practice (e.g., filmmaking). When we have those desires, we then have desire-based reasons. As a result, these reasons will look very much like fundamentally aesthetic reasons, but they won't be. They will also capture why pleasure seemed so central: we do in fact generally desire it.

It's worth returning briefly to motivations for adopting these views. Normative parsimony and naturalistic aspirations are preserved on this version of reductionism. However, though the local motivations may seem preserved in that we can capture the centrality of pleasure, the Kantians who liked disinterested pleasure accounts to begin with will not be satisfied. What seems to them so attractive about that account is that it eliminates our contingent, individual interests. In refocusing

the account on the satisfaction of our desires or goals, this reductionism runs not merely orthogonal to disinterested pleasure, but directly against it.

Still, this account circumvents earlier problems by not tying aesthetic normative facts to particular psychological or prudential states. It also has a much easier time accounting for aesthetic activities in addition to passive aesthetic experience. But it too is vulnerable to the same two categories of worry we've seen. First, it's simply false that people always desire to have aesthetically worthwhile experiences or engage in aesthetically valuable activities. For example, many people just don't desire to have experiences of great art. And many people, when confronted with great art, don't desire to have the aesthetically appropriate response. Aesthetic experiences (and appreciation, value, and reasons) are not sufficiently coextensive with our contingent and variable desires.

Even assuming that people do always desire what is aesthetically called for, the account faces a few problems of the second kind. Suppose someone desires to have an experience of the beautiful. They make their way to a lush forest. In this forest, they have reason to have an experience of the beautiful. In this, the reductionist and non-reductionist agree. However, the reductionist claims that this reason consists in the reason the person has to satisfy their desire to have an experience of the beautiful. For the reductionist, there is only one reason really at play. The non-reductionist departs here, instead offering that the desire to have that experience gives an *additional*, second reason, one given by the beauty of the forest. The latter explanation strikes me as substantially more plausible.

It's possible that the desire-based reasons are moreover the wrong kind of reason to appreciate the forest, where the aesthetic reasons are the right kind of reason to do so. My desire to have an experience of the beautiful does not justify simply having one; that experience is justified by its fit or appropriateness to the objects of experience. If that is right, it offers additional support to the non-reductionist. But if aesthetic reasons consist in desire-based reasons, then they would both have to be the right (or wrong) kind of reason.

Finally, when faced with the beautiful forest, one ought to appreciate it. It would be inappropriate, say, to find it disgusting. This is true even if, in that moment, one has grown quite tired of beauty and what one desires is to feel disgusted for a change. Aesthetic normativity doesn't enjoin us to appreciate the beautiful *if we're into that sort of thing* or appreciate it *if we care about it*. Aesthetics presents us with the reasons to appreciate the artwork, regardless of our preferences and interests.¹³ Aesthetic reasons appear categorical, whereas desire-based reasons are by definition not.

¹³ As Richard Moran puts it, beauty involves "the idea of a demand on the subject that is independent of one's current likes and dislikes" (2012: 322).

Here, we see the same two strategies as before. First, the phenomena are not sufficiently coextensive. Second, even if they were, there are three problems for reducing aesthetic normativity to the normativity of desires. One problem involves under-counting: the reductionist counts one reason where there should be two. The other two point out important structural features of the reduced reasons that should transfer to (or be transferred from) the reasons in the reduction base, but that are in fact not shared: its status as a right- or wrong-kind reason, and its categoricity.

This highlights an additional type of normative-to-normative anti-reductionist argument, which we might call a property transfer argument. If a property that should transfer across a reduction does not transfer, then the reduction fails. Not all properties of reasons are like this. For example, the property *being reducible to desire-based reasons* is not such a property. But *being a right-kind reason* and *being categorical* very plausibly are. (Here we can again compare Kelly, who argues that the apparently categorical character of epistemic reasons undermines epistemic instrumentalism (2003: 621).) Any number of properties are transferable across reductions, such as *favoring action* (or feeling, or belief) or *being authoritatively normative*, and so this opens up a number of argumentative avenues for the non-reductionist.

II.D. *Aesthetics and Practices*

The previous reductions try to make good on the Kantian idea that disinterested pleasure is central to aesthetic experience. But an alternative to this has emerged recently. Persuaded to give up the importance of pleasure to aesthetics, this increasingly popular approach instead analyzes aesthetic normativity as a species of *practice-based normativity*.¹⁴ Practices come with built-in standards, and those standards give rise to practice-based normativity (which is also thereby an intrinsically normative domain). If we have the practice of playing competitive games, then the existence of that practice gives us reason to (try to) win those games. If we have the practice of drinking mixtures of fermented, flammable liquids, then the existence of that practice (call it our cocktail practice) gives us reason to mix some such liquids with others – to achieve within that practice. The practice is usually understood as aesthetic if it is concerned with aesthetic experiences, activities, properties, or value. For example, Robbie Kubala, one defender of such a view, defines an aesthetic practice as one

¹⁴ See, e.g., Lopes 2018, Rohrbaugh 2019, and Kubala 2021.

that “attributes aesthetic value properties” and “constitutively aims at some aesthetic value.”¹⁵ When it is aesthetic, the practice gives rise to aesthetic normativity.

On such a view, facts about aesthetic normativity reduce to facts about practice-based normativity. How does it fare against the first type of anti-reductionist strategy? Aesthetic-to-practice reductionists are committed to thinking that aesthetic experiences and activities are possible only within practices. One obvious worry concerns the appreciation of nature, which seems practice-independent. Nature as a clear exception to the reduction of aesthetic normativity is endorsed even by a noted fan of practice-based normativity, Joseph Raz. Raz sets aesthetic values of nature aside, saying “access to them is culturally dependent, but their existence is not” (34).

But perhaps, contrary to appearances, appreciation of nature is based in practices we have. For instance, the eighteenth-century additions of the sublime and the picturesque are concepts for appreciation of nature that were in some sense taught and could not exist without the corresponding practices. However, though practices of nature appreciation exist (bird-watchers have clubs and practice-defined things they tend to look for), a concept like the sublime does not itself create a practice as much as it describes a way of looking that we have always had. Edmund Burke cites Stonehenge, along with various pieces of classical architecture and Renaissance painting, as embodying the sublime, making apparent that he thought this way of looking was not new. Burke did not take himself to be creating a practice of appreciating nature, but rather to be describing a way we can and have already been experiencing it.

Furthermore, it’s unclear whether many things that we appraise aesthetically count as *aesthetic* on the current account. I can appreciate, for instance, a pair of scissors aesthetically. But if scissor-making is not a practice concerned with aesthetic experiences or activities – if it is a practice concerned with practical ends – then it isn’t an aesthetic practice, and so apparently fails to give rise to any aesthetic normativity at all.

We can also apply the second anti-reductionist strategy to aesthetic-to-practice reductionism. To do so, we grant that aesthetic experience and activity is present only when corresponding practices sustain them, setting aside, e.g., any reservations about scissors or natural beauty. Still, the reductionist faces problems. For one, it wrongly predicts that the most paradigmatic works in an aesthetic practice are the best ones. The *most* cubist paintings are the *best* cubist paintings. If this were so, we should generally prefer Braque to Picasso. On the contrary, it is a familiar fact that artworks

¹⁵ Kubala 2021: 411.

that subvert aesthetic norms and practices may have great aesthetic value.¹⁶ Such views thus accord the wrong amount of value to such pieces.

Even if the reason to produce aesthetically valuable objects is that it would be an achievement according to standards of a practice, this account doesn't explain sufficiently why we should appreciate those achievements.¹⁷ It says that we should appreciate them in the way and to the extent that we appreciate anything that complies to that degree with a practice-based standard. But some aesthetic practices produce things of *more* aesthetic value than others. Even the most stunningly designed pair of scissors is probably not as aesthetically impressive as *A Picture of Dorian Gray*. But the reductionist cannot capture this, since they are both comparably meeting the standards of their respective practices. Moreover, we can appreciate them as achievements within a practice, but that isn't yet to appreciate them *aesthetically*. I can admire someone for running a marathon (running that much is hard and takes a lot of training!), but that isn't to admire them aesthetically. I can admire Oscar Wilde for writing *A Picture of Dorian Gray* insofar as it is an achievement within a practice (writing a novel is hard and takes a lot of skill and work!), but I can also appreciate it in a different, aesthetic way. Because I may admire for two reasons, rather than just one, this view undercounts aesthetic reasons.

A last thought I'll offer, but won't defend in any detail, is that aesthetic normativity is authoritatively normative, and practice-based normativity isn't. We have no fundamental reason to comply with practices; we only have such reason if the practices or goods enabled by those practices are worth promoting. Aesthetic value, on the other hand, is itself a good worth pursuing. Even if they always overlap, aesthetic normativity and practice-based normativity couldn't be the same because they have importantly incompatible properties.

What I have said so far oversimplifies existing practice-based accounts. Commonly defended versions actually involve what appears to be a multi-tiered reduction. So, for example, on Lopes' view, achievement in practices is normative because it contributes to our well-being.¹⁸ And Kubala

¹⁶ One defender of this sort of view, Dominic McIver Lopes, bites this bullet, arguing that we have reason not to stray outside of existing aesthetic practices (except when straying drives the development of further aesthetic practices) (2018: 164-180).

¹⁷ By focusing on aesthetic activities rather than aesthetic experience, such accounts rightly aim to fix many errors of prior aesthetic theories. But they overshoot in certain ways, and here is one way to see that.

¹⁸ Lopes claims that this does not reduce the aesthetic to the non-aesthetic (2018: 48), but seems with this to be saying that the view leaves open the question of what demarcates aesthetic phenomena from non-aesthetic phenomena.

defends a similar view, except that achievement is not the only well-being-promoting factor involved in aesthetic practices (hence his dubbing it “pluralism”).¹⁹

These multi-tiered accounts introduce additional complexity. There are two different ways to flesh them out. One says all facts about aesthetic normativity consist in facts about practice-based normativity, and that those in turn consist in facts about prudential normativity; it adds that all three are authoritatively normative, though the former two only derivatively so. In short, it (a) endorses aesthetic-to-practice reductionism, (b) endorses practice-to-prudence reductionism, and (c) endorses the authoritative normativity of prudence. Another says all facts about aesthetic normativity consist in facts about practice-based normativity, but agrees with general consensus in denying authoritative normativity to practices. It adds that prudence is authoritatively normative, so that we only have authoritative reason to engage in such practices when and to the extent that doing so promotes our well-being. In short, it (a) endorses aesthetic-to-practice reductionism, (b) rejects the authoritative normativity of practices (and therefore also of aesthetics), but (c) endorses the authoritative normativity of well-being. As I understand them, Lopes (and Kubala) defend versions of the second view.

One alternative to this, defended by Guy Rohrbaugh, presents aesthetic value itself as giving us reason to participate in a practice that realizes that value.²⁰ Even if that practice is the only way to realize that value, this view is non-reductionist because it doesn’t reduce all facts about aesthetic normativity to the normativity of practices. Rather, aesthetic value remains foundational. Rohrbaugh explicitly takes his non-reductionism to be the only way to secure the distinctly aesthetic nature of aesthetic reasons. But this isn’t true, or not without some further specification. To see why, we need to confront another metanormative question: how do we distinguish normative domains from one another?

III. Reductionism, Eliminativism, and the Bounds of Normativity

Let’s approach an answer by thinking about eliminativism. Each reductionism above has not only a corresponding non-reductionism, but also a corresponding eliminativism, which sees the would-be reduced normative phenomena as nonexistent. In some sense, both see the reduced facts as

¹⁹ Kubala 2021: 422.

²⁰ Rohrbaugh 2019.

superfluous, but eliminativists think they're so superfluous that we needn't even posit their existence.

However clear that distinction may seem, actually adjudicating between reductionism and eliminativism is not easy, and existing defenses of inter-domain eliminativism don't offer much insight. Though epistemic instrumentalism is typically defended as a reductionist view, David Papineau argues for an eliminativist cognate instead. He claims that "there is no distinctive species of normativity attaching to the adoption of beliefs," and that "all such prescriptions arise from considerations of moral value, or personal value, or possibly aesthetic value, and not from any distinct species of doxastic value."²¹ But Papineau argues for this view the very same way a reductionist would, contrasting eliminativism with the existence of *sui generis* doxastic reasons without mentioning reductionism as a possible alternative.

In a different arena, Alex Worsnip argues for eliminativism about prudential normativity. He argues that prudence is not a "fundamental source of reasons," contrasting that with beer-hoppiness reasons.²² As I understand it, fundamentality requires irreducibility (and maybe also authoritativeness). And so, because he is only interested in prudence as a fundamental source of reasons, his argument targets eliminativism about prudential normativity so understood. That is, prudential normativity *if irreducible* does not exist. But for all he's said, prudential normativity might be a non-fundamental source of reasons, i.e., it might be a reducible normative domain.

There are at least two separate issues here. One is whether epistemic or prudential normativity is reducible, and another is whether it is authoritative. Maybe prudential reasons are not *sui generis* because they are fully reducible to some other normative domain(s), and they are also not authoritatively normative – a fundamental source of reasons. Similarly, beer-hoppiness reasons are *sui generis* if they don't reduce to other types of reasons. They just wouldn't thereby be authoritatively normative. Once we distinguish these two questions and set authoritativeness aside, we are left with no insight into why we should prefer eliminativism over reductionism.²³

²¹ Papineau 2013: 64.

²² Worsnip 2018: 237.

²³ Indeed, there is a further question if we recall the additional concept, introduced earlier, of intrinsically and extrinsically normative domains. The question of whether a domain is authoritatively or irreducibly normative is separate from the question of whether it is intrinsically normative. For example, practices are intrinsically normative insofar as they come with built-in standards. But they are not authoritatively normative, and they may or may not be reducible to some other domain. Or, if belief is an intrinsically normative concept and epistemic instrumentalism is true, then epistemic normativity is an intrinsically normative domain that is not irreducibly normative – though it might be authoritative.

Because these authors ignore cross-cutting metanormative issues, they make matters look simpler than they are. We have as yet no clear reasons to prefer reductionism or eliminativism when both are live options. But one important consideration hasn't yet been explicitly addressed: eliminativism is a more parsimonious view. We shouldn't multiply normative domains beyond necessity. This is why the impulse to reductionism introduces the threat of eliminativism, and I suspect that this is why Papineau skips over the reductionist alternative without so much as a mention. If we acknowledge that some normative domain is not *sui generis*, we have reductionist and eliminativist options. To resist sliding into eliminativism, the reductionist needs to show that their reduced domain is a necessary posit.

My proposal is that, when it comes to inter-domain reductions, the best and perhaps only way to defend reductionism as opposed to eliminativism is to offer what I'll call an *individuation principle*, a principle according to which we pick out a certain normative domain as the domain it is. This is because, ultimately, reductionists need some way of picking out what it is that exists, and in this case that means some way of picking out what is reduced *as a normative domain*, distinct from other normative domains.

This might sound strange, but what I'm proposing isn't that different from how we treat other normative-to-normative reductionisms – or, really, reductionisms of any kind. As Peter Railton writes, “Whether a reduction is vindicative or eliminative will depend upon the specific character of what is being reduced and what the reduction basis looks like.”²⁴ Consider again the right and the good – does the right reduce to the good or does it not exist? To answer this, we have to know what the right *is* and how we are picking it out. We can respond to the threat of eliminativism and vindicate reductionism if we say (for instance) that the right concerns the deontic status of actions, and that something is right when there is, say, a single permissible action or a most recommended action. This is one way of picking out what it is that must exist, if the right is to exist. If the right reduces to the good, that means we can give a full account of the right in terms of the good – and that facts about the right *persist*, that statements about the right continue to be true, and so on. They're just not explanatorily or metaphysically fundamental. But if we have no way to individuate the right, we have no way to hold back eliminativism.

Notice that other potential anti-eliminativist strategies imply this one. For instance, if we pick out a set of statements that would have to be false were the normative domain eliminated, that

²⁴ Railton 1989: 161.

set of statements implies an individuation principle. In the case of reductionism of the right to the good, we preserve reductionism when we want to preserve the possible truth of statements concerning (say) what is morally required. But this is just a roundabout way of saying that the right is what concerns moral requirement.

Indeed I take it that Michelle Dyke, an epistemic instrumentalist, is doing precisely this. She understands epistemic reasons as “deriving their authority from the collective social aim of promoting reliable peer testimony.”²⁵ Her view is one where reasons count as epistemic in virtue of their content or subject matter. It’s not that they’re reasons for beliefs, since practical reasons can share that – and necessarily so, per epistemic instrumentalism. It’s instead that they concern testimony, which is an epistemic matter. On my framing, this is how she individuates epistemic normativity as the normative domain that it is, even if the normative force of epistemic reasons derives ultimately from the normative force of practical reasons. And it is precisely such an individuation that is required, if we’re to maintain the existence of the domain that is being reduced.

Thus it looks like Rohrbaugh’s assumption that his non-reductionism is the only way to secure the distinctiveness of aesthetic value is too quick. If the right is reducible to the good, does the right cease to be distinctive? Well, in a way no. As long as we have an individuation principle, it is distinct in that we know what it is and when it exists. But in another way yes, in that the reduced domain draws whatever normative force it enjoys from its reduction base. So Rohrbaugh is right that non-reductionism will secure the distinctiveness of aesthetic value, but the reductionist also necessarily requires some way to secure that distinctiveness: their individuation principle. But reductionism by definition cannot secure a distinctive normative force for its reduced domain.

IV. Conclusion

I’ve suggested that those thinking about inter-domain, normative-to-normative reductions can ask at least three distinct questions of their reducing domain: whether it is intrinsically normative, whether it is reducible, and whether it is authoritative. These concepts and their associated distinctions are often run together, understood at best inchoately and implicitly. Future normative theory would do well to think more about these differences. Further thinking might reveal, for instance, that there are some interesting and informative entailments. Perhaps all intrinsically normative domains really are

²⁵ Dyke 2021: 857.

authoritatively normative, or all reducibly normative domains are extrinsically normative. Or maybe extrinsically normative domains don't deserve to be called normative domains at all.

Whether and to what degree the final worry I mentioned above is a real worry may depend on how we answer these and other questions about normative domains. When we want to secure distinctiveness, as Rohrbaugh does (and as I myself have), what is it that we are really trying to secure? If we want the aesthetic or the epistemic to be special in a way that disinterested pleasure isn't, would it suffice if these were intrinsically normative domains? I suspect not, since there are actually a great number of intrinsically normative concepts and associated domains – including practices, courage and other thick terms, perhaps gender and race, logical validity, and so on. But it's worth thinking about more.

We talk *a lot* about normative domains, even if we don't use those words. This is obvious in the philosophical work on many issues in normativity and metanormativity. But we do so even outside of that work. We group our curricula and research programs into normative domains like ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics; we add normative domains to that list as candidates for a certain kind of associated attention and favor. But for all this talk, we lack a sufficiently detailed grasp of what it is that we are talking about.

Along with these three questions I noted above, individuation principles play a crucial role in thinking through what it is that we are constantly talking about. If nothing else, we need them to settle debates between reductionism and eliminativism. But surely much more rides on them, and the long and diverse history of philosophy provides many, sometimes radically different ways of carving up these domains. At the end of the day, we need to know what it is that we are trying to defend as authoritative or intrinsically normative or in some other way distinctive, special, and important.

I'm not sure if there's a better way forward that would individuate the domains in some other way. And while I am relieved to be a non-(normative-to-normative)-reductionist about the aesthetic, since then the threat of eliminativism by way of reductionism doesn't trouble me, these are issues that any metanormative theorist must at some point reckon with.²⁶

²⁶ Thanks to the audience at the 2022 Chapel Hill Metaethics Workshop and to Guy Fletcher, Chris Howard, Alex Worsnip, and especially Simon Kirchin and two anonymous referees for helpful discussion of these issues.

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