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Critical Aesthetic Realism

JENNIFER A. MCMAHON

Introduction

A clear-cut concept of the aesthetic is elusive. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* presents one of the more comprehensive aesthetic theories from which we can extract a set of features, some of which pertain to aesthetic experience and others to the logical structure of aesthetic judgment. When considered together, however, these features present a number of tensions and apparent contradictions. Kant's own attempt to dissolve these apparent contradictions or dichotomies was not entirely satisfactory as it rested on a vague notion of indeterminacy. He addressed the emerging tensions with his distinction between pure and dependent beauty, which is a distinction I believe a satisfactory theory of aesthetic judgment would reveal as unfounded. In addition, Kant left a crucial connection unaccounted for. This was the connection between the two aspects that he envisaged characterized an aesthetic judgment. The two aspects to which I refer are the "purposiveness of form" provided by the Imagination and the associated mental content, which Kant called "aesthetic ideas."

More recent aesthetic theories treat only a subset of the features addressed in Kant's aesthetic theory. Even so, the standard aesthetic theories, such as expressivism, cognitivism, and formalism, entrench the kind of thinking that grounds these dichotomies. In contrast, I will demonstrate that a naturalized aesthetic theory can accommodate all the features suggested by the Kantian analysis in such a way that they are shown to be complementary rather than contradictory. I begin by presenting the relevant features in terms of the dichotomies to which they give rise, before the meaning of the terms involved are adjusted through naturalization. In conclusion, I identify an important implication that the aesthetic theory that results has for aesthetic education.

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1. Tensions to Be Resolved

1.1 *Objectivity and autonomy*

Typically, one does not treat aesthetic disagreements about the kind of objects one values and about which one is knowledgeable as no-fault matters. For example, someone with extensive knowledge of and experience with cars might consider a particular car's speed capacity, its ease of handling, and steering sensitivity as relevant to an aesthetic judgment of it. For such an expert, an aesthetic judgment that ignores these qualities would be a judgment about an incomprehensive set of the particular car's properties. By the expert's lights, it might be the kind of aesthetic judgment typically made by a novice.

The expert would typically dismiss the novice's aesthetic judgment as uninformed even though both the novice's and the expert's aesthetic judgments are ultimately based on subjective responses to the object. For the expert, it is as if certain experiences with objects of the relevant kind ground what is taken to constitute the object to be judged. In other words, understanding provided by background knowledge and experience features as part of the object of aesthetic judgment. In this case, the variations between the respective aesthetic judgments of the expert and the novice would reflect variations in background knowledge and experience.

However, both the expert and the novice would be persuaded by their aesthetic responses. Their aesthetic estimations are felt or intuitive (one might invoke practical reason to explain this) rather than the result of consciously applying certain criteria. A genuine judgment, in contrast, is thought to involve the application of criteria either explicitly or implicitly. We might represent this and other features of genuine judgments in terms of certain underlying principles that govern them. I will call these principles the typical principles of objectivity. They can be formulated as follows:

- (i) A judgment can be based on a verbal description, in the absence of one's experience of the actual object.
- (ii) We can be said to know the verdict of a judgment based on testimony.
- (iii) A judgment is assumed to be based on criteria or conditions that are either necessary, sufficient, or strongly support the verdict, and that such criteria can be stated.
- (iv) A judgment is the conclusion to an argument, either a deductive or inductive argument.

What we call aesthetic judgment, however, does not satisfy any of the typical principles of objectivity. It is generally accepted by aestheticians and philosophers of art (and indeed the general public as represented by my

students) that one needs to be personally acquainted with an object in order to be entitled to judge it aesthetically. Furthermore, when others disagree with one's own aesthetic judgment, one cannot simply adopt the other view, even when it is the majority view, as one would if aesthetic judgments were objective in the same way that cognitive judgments are objective. One cannot justify one's aesthetic judgment by naming the kinds of properties that will hitherto form the basis of predictions or generalizations about aesthetic merit. An aesthetic judgment is not the conclusion to an argument. When the typical principles of objectivity obtain, we are making a cognitive judgment, not an aesthetic one.

Kant explains that aesthetic judgments operate *as if they were* objective. The perception/apprehension of the beautiful object deploys the "Imagination" (or we might say "perception") and the "Understanding" ("cognition" for our purposes) in such a way that their attunement is heightened and we experience the "harmony of the faculties."¹ The experience of the "harmony of the faculties" in the course of perceiving an object constitutes the apprehension of what we would call the imaginative unity or aesthetic form. The quasi-objectivity is explained by the role of the perceptual object in the subpersonal basis of this experience. Something about the objective properties of the object deploy "Imagination" and "Understanding" in the course of our perception of it such that we experience an imaginative unity or aesthetic form. This is the way Kant grounds the autonomy of aesthetic judgment. It is provided with a rational basis but is accessed through a feeling or attitude of a particular kind.²

Without further elaboration, aesthetic judgment would be compatible with a subjective response, like the pleasure of a cool breeze on a warm night. However, Kant explicitly distinguishes sensory pleasure from aesthetic pleasure on the basis that their objects are different. The former is personal while the object of the latter is other than personal. Aesthetic pleasure features in a kind of judgment that makes a claim on everyone's assent.³ To some extent, Kant takes for granted the motivation for this distinction and the need to make of the aesthetic response something quasi-objective. To remind ourselves of the empirical evidence for this distinction we need to turn to Hume.⁴

The most compelling evidence that aesthetic judgments are objective is our recognition that some aesthetic judgments are more apt than others. This is the point explored by Hume in his quest to find the basis for settling aesthetic disagreements. I would restate the problem as why we concern ourselves with aesthetic disagreements at all, given that the basis of the judgment is our feeling or attitude. Yet even a cursory glance at the way aesthetic choices operate within cultures and same-interest groups is enough to demonstrate that we seem to approximate our aesthetic responses to those we consider our peers. The possibility of this active aesthetic

approximation needs reconciling with Kant's underlying explanation for aesthetic judgment. The former suggests that explicit reasons can be invoked to influence aesthetic judgment whereas the latter suggests that aesthetic judgment is subdoxastic. The problem then is to accommodate the role of background knowledge and experience in aesthetic judgment without creating the conditions for all the typical principles of objectivity to obtain, which would rule out aesthetic autonomy.

1.2 Universality and the acquaintance principle

Aesthetic judgments have interpersonal significance. The statement that best captures an aesthetic judgment is an assertion such as "X is beautiful," rather than the expression "I like X." With the latter one might be expressing an idiosyncratic preference. Idiosyncrasy sits uncomfortably with aesthetic judgment if we accept the analyses that conclude that built into the concept of beauty is a claim on everyone's assent. The notion is that normativity is embedded in the concept "beauty." Aesthetic judgments have cognitive command.

On the face of it, the cognitive command of aesthetic judgments is at odds with the role of feeling or attitude. The relevant feeling or attitude is usually alluded to as a response to the apprehension of a unity that seems to emerge from a disparate array of elements. This means that one needs to be there because making an aesthetic judgment is a matter of experiencing the appropriate response. How is it possible, then, to legislate on how one is to feel about a particular object? Yet, that such legislation is called for is suggested by the cognitive command of aesthetic judgment. To put it another way, how can the crucial role of feeling or attitude be reconciled to the universality of aesthetic judgment? This needs to be resolved without ruling out other features of aesthetic judgment. For example, we could treat aesthetic properties as analogous to dispositional properties, and this would reconcile universality with the acquaintance principle. However, such a treatment would rule out the possibility of genuine aesthetic disagreements.

1.3 Genuine aesthetic disagreements and subjectivity

A genuine disagreement is one where a genuine judgment is involved. For a genuine judgment, there needs to be critical reasons that one can draw upon to support one's view. Otherwise, the variation in belief might simply be due to an optical illusion or an irreducible aspect of experience—like the feel of a cool breeze on a warm night—neither of which we would consider constitutes a genuine judgment.

Where our feelings and emotions are concerned, our responses might vary, but we do not normally think of such variations as disagreements. You might love roses while I prefer daffodils, but we are not by virtue of

this disparity in our choices necessarily or typically having a disagreement. When we do have an aesthetic disagreement, we attempt to ascertain the basis of the disagreement by pointing out what aspect of the object gave rise to our aesthetic experience of it. We behave as though there are critical reasons for our aesthetic response. Without the possibility of such critical reasons, we would treat the disparity in our responses as personal, not aesthetic.

It is a standard axiom of aesthetic theory that one knows that an object is beautiful by how it makes one feel or the attitude it provokes. One recognizes the feeling or attitude as the kind evoked by the beautiful by the kind of mental state involved, but more of that later. To ascribe an aesthetic property to an object is to acknowledge a certain effect that the object has on one. We all have privileged access to our own feelings or attitudes. The problem is, as aesthetic judgment is conducted through feeling or attitude, what is the point of characterizing variations in aesthetic responses as disagreements? How can critical reasons be invoked to defend a feeling or attitude as if it were a genuine judgment? In other words, how are genuine aesthetic disagreements possible?

1.4 Peculiar cognitive content and aesthetic form

Aesthetic judgments may not be cognitive judgments, but they exhibit a peculiar cognitive content all the same. This content is difficult to characterize as it eludes literal representation. Imagine an experience you would characterize as an experience of beauty. Right now I am thinking about the experience evoked by walking to a local park after heavy rain: the smell of wet pavements, the visual sharpness of vivid contrasts that often appear in the colors of the natural world when drenched with rain, the shimmer of wet leaves, the squelch of shoes sinking into puddles in the grass, and the feel of the cleansed air against one's skin. These sensory items evoke a wealth of richly felt experience presumably remembered from my past that occur as nuance, intimations, fragments, all of which unite in a state of mind that is fuller and somehow richer than any of the mental items that I manage to extract and convert into propositions.

The very best experiences of this kind involve a mental state flooded by fragments, intimations, nuance, and feeling rather than full concepts. The mental content eludes representation but is unified nonetheless. This unity has a characteristic feel. It evokes rather uplifting ideas that for the moment see everyday concerns recede into the background. As a rough approximation, the response evoked by the unity might be anchored with ideas like freedom, immortality, and infinity. Notice the claim is that the *unity* of the wealth of indeterminate material evoked by a given experience is what evokes the uplifting ideas, not the particular content of the initial experience.

What is peculiar about the ideas evoked in turn by the relevant unity is that they are ideas for which there are no counterparts in nature and experience. They are not simply abstract ideas because even abstract ideas like love and evil can be demonstrated and illustrated. We can point to direct examples of love and evil in actions, events, and expressions. Such concepts help us to organize experience. In contrast, ideas like immortality, infinity, and a finely conceived notion of freedom have no perceptual counterparts. They have no instances in the world. The peculiar cognitive content of beauty is like that. It can be thought but cannot be perceived. A defining feature of aesthetic judgment is that it is constituted in part by an experience of ideas that have no perceptual counterpart.

In sum, the claim is that the imagined unity of a perceptual object can evoke ideas for which there are no perceptual counterparts. The problem is to link these ideas with the experience of unity that it is claimed gives rise to them and to do this without relying on representational content. This would explain the peculiar content attributed to the aesthetic experience of not only representational artworks but also evoked in experiencing the beauty of nature and abstract artworks like music and nonfigurative painting.

For the moment we will focus on the nature of the imaginative unity referred to above. We have called this “aesthetic form.” The relevant imaginative unity cannot be predicted by a set of base properties, nor can the relevant unity be described. The apprehension of this unity is one of the core components of aesthetic judgment. However, its apprehension can be facilitated. For example, we might evoke images in a person’s mind by certain phrases, gestures, or sensory or intellectual triggers that in turn unlock the wealth of material whose unity evokes the kind of ideas referred to above. In this sense, the imaginative unity or aesthetic form refers to our perceivings of objects rather than the properties of objects.

Now let us turn back to the peculiar cognitive content. In addressing the content of aesthetic judgment, Kant’s aesthetic theory is superior to all attempts to formulate an aesthetic theory. Kant addresses the peculiar content of aesthetic judgments through his doctrine of aesthetic ideas. Ideas that have no counterpart in nature or experience are called “rational ideas” by Kant. When they are manifested through an imaginative unity, they are experienced through a personal lens and as such are called “aesthetic ideas” by Kant. According to Kant, the artist is by definition a person who can find a sensible form to evoke an imaginative unity that in turn gives rise to these ideas.

The difficulty with Kant’s theory is that he does not explain the necessary link between the apprehension of aesthetic form and the experience of aesthetic ideas. There are no critical reasons that link aesthetic form to aesthetic ideas. The connection between aesthetic form and aesthetic ideas remains mysterious. The kind of connection Kant points to is that fragments

of percepts that are combined into a unity by other than the principles that underlie determinate concepts give rise to a unity for which there is no corresponding determinate concept. Such a unity evokes, in turn, ideas or concepts that have no corresponding percepts. Until now, no one has attempted to ground this connection.

That a necessary link between aesthetic form and aesthetic ideas is required in order to make sense of Kant's thesis is avoided by Kant commentators in the following ways: by identifying aesthetic form with aesthetic ideas,⁵ by dismissing the notion of aesthetic ideas as incoherent,⁶ or by treating aesthetic form and aesthetic ideas as representing two theoretical perspectives on the one process.⁷ All of these approaches maintain to varying degrees the original dichotomies arising from Kant's aesthetic thesis. We will see that it is through getting the relation between aesthetic form and aesthetic ideas right that we accommodate as complementary features the normative and expressive aspects of aesthetic judgment.

The problem, then, is to reconcile the cognitive content that has no perceptual counterpart with the perceptual content that defies direct representation in a way that captures what is common to all aesthetic experience, including the aesthetic experience of nature and abstract artworks, among which I would include absolute music.⁸

1.5 Fact and value

An event or object might only be experienced as beautiful after a certain period of acculturation or education into the relevant conventions. Aesthetic judgments seem to converge within cultures and same-interest groups. Furthermore, critical reasons are relevant to aesthetic verdicts, as we saw in our earlier example of the car expert. These examples might suggest that principled reasons can play a part in what is considered beautiful by shaping what we pay attention to in the event or object. On the other hand, as suggested by my example of taking a walk in the aftermath of heavy rain, aesthetic form or an imaginative unity is more accurately thought of as simply apprehended in the perceptual object rather than the direct result of reasoning. The various aspects of an aesthetic experience suggest that there might be some interplay between causes and reasons that needs to be accounted for in the way we envisage the structure of aesthetic judgment.

While the factual nature of a judgment in other domains is the basis of the compulsion to agree with those judgments, the particular causal nature of aesthetic form should present an obstacle to such agreement. This is because one's apprehension of aesthetic form is not caused like my perception of the redness of a flower. Attributing redness to a flower on the basis of my perception of it demands agreement and is typically achieved among those with normally functioning perceptual processes. In contrast, the object of an aesthetic judgment is not a given. One cannot assume that the object or event that conjures up a wealth of material in one's mind and lends itself to

an imaginative unity has the same effect on everyone. All we can assume is that if a wealth of material is conjured up and it evokes an imaginative unity of the type described earlier, then an experience of aesthetic ideas will be forthcoming. In this respect, aesthetic judgment is like a sensory response. Like the cold chill I feel at the window, one cannot be made to have this response through argument or the pressure of other people's approval. My friend stands at the same window and enjoys the bracing freshness of it. The role of causes here seems to put aesthetic judgment beyond the reach of cultural influence.

However, this is not the whole story. The object of an aesthetic judgment is not simply given. It is an imaginative unity, and the experience of such a unity might be coaxed in a person through reasons and experience (practical reasons) of various kinds. Aesthetic judgments, then, are susceptible to cultural influence and consequently to embodying cultural values in their particular manifestations. So while aesthetic judgments are not straightforward perceptual judgments, neither are they like irreducible sensory responses.

The problem is that aesthetic judgments exhibit some features of cognitive judgments and other features of expressions of value. It would be convenient if mental processes all had a finite recorded history and we could trace how the powers of pure and practical reasoning morphed into aesthetic judgments under certain conditions or adaptive pressures. This is what is attempted when evolutionary theory is drawn upon to shed light on aesthetic matters.

1.6 Evolutionary significance and relativity

The dichotomy presented in this subsection introduces terms not found in Kant's aesthetics. However, our purpose is to clarify our concept of the aesthetic rather than Kant scholarship per se. To this end, a consideration of the aesthetic as an adaptive capacity might be instructive. Of course, our aesthetic capacity might just be an offshoot of other capacities that are adaptive or a legacy of a once adaptive trait. However, given the prevalence and, more significantly, the active cultivation of aesthetically motivated behavior in all cultures since the late Pleistocene period, it is reasonable to at least consider the purpose that such a capacity might serve. If we treat the aesthetic capacity as adaptive, one would expect some constraints regarding aesthetic preferences, even if only at a general level, analogous, say, to our preference for sweetness over sourness, all else being equal.

It would seem to be a noncontroversial fact that what is considered an aesthetic object is influenced by cultural learning. Aesthetic preferences can differ considerably between cultures, groups, and individuals. However, within cultural groups, aesthetic judgments seem to be norm bound. The variability between cultures concerning what constitutes an aesthetic object would need to be reconciled with the evolutionary significance

of aesthetically motivated behavior if it were found to have evolutionary significance.

Consider that our distant ancestors would have needed to compete for the most health-promoting and energy-giving foods, the most fertile mates, and the territorial rights to the best-resourced lands. The appreciation for the aesthetic, in contrast, lies outside the competitive imperative. An individual's aesthetic pleasure is not typically at anyone's expense, not even in the most underresourced communities. That is, aesthetic pleasure is not satisfied by virtue of individual consumption or ownership. It may be exploited for individual gain, but the pleasure itself is not had by virtue of such gain. This suggests that if it is adaptive, it is selected for something other than the traits that directly serve the individual. The problem is to explain the evolutionary significance of our aesthetic capacity: a capacity that it would seem is adaptive for the individual by virtue of serving a larger unit such as the community.

2. Standard Aesthetic Theories

Now I turn to the standard types of aesthetic theory to consider how they rate regarding their ability to dissolve the above dichotomies.

2.1 *Expressivism*

Expressivism is the thesis that aesthetic judgment is a subjective response to an aspect of the object. Beauty and aesthetic qualities would not be real properties if expressivism were true. They would simply represent ways of characterizing real properties imaginatively. The ascription of aesthetic properties according to expressivism is always the expression of a felt response to the object. Expressivism accommodates autonomy, the acquaintance principle, subjectivity, aesthetic value, and the relativity of aesthetic judgments at the expense of objectivity, the possibility of genuine aesthetic disagreements, and the defining cognitive content of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, it requires supplementation to accommodate universality and aesthetic form; and the aesthetic as an adaptive capacity.

On the expressivist account of aesthetic judgment, even the best of our aesthetic experiences would be devoid of any aesthetically definitive cognitive content. The excitement one might feel at a football match or the tender love felt for a baby would both qualify as aesthetic judgments. An example of such a theory is Ellen Dissanayake's evolutionary theory of art.⁹ Dissanayake's theory is a detailed and nuanced version of expressivism, according to which our aesthetic capacity or impulse has evolved to cement our sense of community through shared values and preferences. Arguably there are objective and universal elements to her theory where the particular aesthetic practices of a group are treated as norm-bound practices

developed to coordinate universal dispositions.¹⁰ However, Dissanayake's theory does not provide the theoretical apparatus to account for the very content that is most intriguing and rewarding about the aesthetic.

In addition, Dissanayake's theory of art does not explicitly accommodate cognitive mediation between the object and the aesthetic characterization (which will be discussed in more detail later). This reduces the theory's explanatory power for features that are nonetheless implicitly recognized by Dissanayake, such as the possibility of approximating one's aesthetic response to those of one's community or peer group. Most noteworthy for our purposes, Dissanayake's expressivism does not reconcile the possibility of genuine aesthetic disagreements with subjectivity, cognitive content with aesthetic form, nor the normativity of aesthetic judgments with the value such judgments express.

2.2 *Cognitivism*

Cognitivism treats aesthetic ascriptions as picking out real properties of objects. Typically supervenience is used to explain the relation between aesthetic properties and nonaesthetic properties. Theories of this kind vary regarding what kind of nonaesthetic properties can be included in the supervenience base. Nonaesthetic properties are classified as broad and narrow. Broad nonaesthetic properties include context and relevant background knowledge, experience, and theory. Narrow nonaesthetic properties include only those properties that are intrinsic to the object like color, shape, melody, pitch, narrative, dialogue, choreography, lighting, and so on. In the case of figurative artworks, what the artwork depicts, rather than what it portrays, can be considered an intrinsic property. For example, that a picture depicts a man nailed to a cross might be an intrinsic property of the object, but that it portrays Christ is not.

Narrow nonaesthetic properties are broken down further into formal and nonformal: formal properties refer to the perceptual elements and their treatment—which in the visual arts would be color, line, form, shape, and texture—and those qualities common in all art forms, such as repetition, contrast, gradation, and other relational properties. Nonformal intrinsic properties refer to the depicted conceptual content, such as a man nailed to a cross. Cognitivism in aesthetics is usually the thesis that the conceptual content both narrow (nonformal intrinsic) and broad (context or what the content portrays) of depictions (in any medium) can form the supervenience base of aesthetic properties. The degree to which formal nonaesthetic properties are included in this base vary among such theories. Hence, that a man is nailed to a cross and that the man is Christ are both relevant to aesthetic judgment according to cognitivism. However, the degree to which the formal treatment of the depiction is relevant varies from theory to theory.

Cognitivism accommodates objectivity, universality, genuine disagreements, and the role of critical reasons to the same extent that all cognitive

judgments do. However, the peculiar cognitive content of aesthetic judgment would only be relevant to those objects that depict and portray themes literally expressive of rational ideas. This would exclude nature, absolute music, and abstract artworks from those objects we could experience aesthetically. Furthermore, regarding those objects that deal literally with such themes, the cognitivist has no way of distinguishing between their expression in art and their representation in a journal or newspaper article. Given her tool kit, the cognitivist is not entitled to make the distinction between expression and representation where aesthetic objects are concerned. When, in spite of this, the cognitivist endorses autonomy or the acquaintance principle so as to capture the necessity of first-person experience in an aesthetic judgment, she can only stipulate the principle on an *ad hoc* basis because it is not supported by the central thesis of cognitivism.

Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson support a version of cognitivism about aesthetic properties, according to which aesthetic properties always include in their supervenience base broad and narrow nonformal properties.¹¹ This means there are no cases where aesthetic properties supervene on formal properties alone. In addition, they are selective as to which broad and narrow nonformal properties are relevant to aesthetic judgment. They include only those properties that contribute to the scientific classification of the object. That is, aesthetic properties supervene on real properties or the kind of properties recognized by science. For example, the food source and mating behavior of an animal will be at least as relevant to its aesthetic properties as will its color and texture. Parsons and Carlson reject relational properties such as “taller than” or “repetition” from the supervening base as they are not relevant to an object’s scientific classification and hence not relevant to the object’s aesthetic properties. Even so, they call particular aesthetic properties by the standard names such as delicacy, poignancy, exuberance, and so on.

In moral philosophy, “supervenience” represents the relation between natural facts and moral facts, which presumably reflects the relation between descriptions and moral judgments. That is, where the descriptions of two events are indistinguishable, their moral evaluation will be indistinguishable. While this has some explanatory power in the ethical case given that moral facts are accessed through descriptions, it lacks power in the aesthetic case. The properties of the object rather than a particular description of it are taken as the supervenience base of an aesthetic evaluation according to aesthetic cognitivism. Yet, aesthetic judgments of an object do change even with no change in the properties of the object. This would suggest that so-called aesthetic properties do not supervene on the properties of the object.

According to Parsons and Carlson, in contrast, there is a description of the object that is relevant to aesthetic judgment, and this is the scientific description. If we shift the supervenience base of aesthetic properties to the scientific description of the object rather than the object (even if we treat this description as nonverbal and instead a way of configuring the object), there

is still no way to accommodate the relativity of, and the value expressed by, aesthetic judgments. All Parsons and Carlson can accommodate are true and false aesthetic judgments or degrees thereof.

Given that an object's status as art can be dependent on characterizations of it that vary from one generation to the next, or from one culture to another, we would be stretching the meaning of the term "real" to the breaking point by applying it to aesthetic properties, and yet this is what the aesthetic cognitivist would do. Cognitivists assume they can (i) include the context of the object (broad nonaesthetic properties) in the supervenience base of aesthetic properties; (ii) classify aesthetic properties as real properties (presumably properties whose objective basis exists independently of mind); and, in most cases, (iii) simply stipulate that the process of apprehending aesthetic properties is subjective, autonomous, and must satisfy the acquaintance principle. This is simply incoherent. The cognitivist avoids having to explain how aesthetic evaluations blur into descriptions by simply failing to distinguish values from facts in the aesthetic realm.

Aesthetic cognitivism cannot accommodate the centrality of feeling or attitude in aesthetic judgment (the autonomy of aesthetic judgments) in a way that is compatible with the manner in which we approximate our aesthetic responses to those we consider our peers (aesthetic normativity). Furthermore, a cognitivist cannot distinguish between expressions and representations where aesthetic objects are concerned, nor accommodate nature, absolute music, or abstract artworks as aesthetic objects (when its peculiar cognitive content is treated as necessary). In its favor perhaps is its economy regarding the evolutionary justification. There is no need for such a justification given that the aesthetic would not exercise a unique capacity. It would simply be a cognitive judgment. However, the very features of cognitivism that lend it this economy are the same features that pull the rug out from all those features that characterize the expressive nature of aesthetic judgments. If aesthetic judgments were analogous to cognitive judgments, all the typical principles of objectivity would obtain, and hence autonomy, the acquaintance principle, and subjectivity would be ruled out. In an ironic twist, aesthetic cognitivism eliminates the aesthetic.

2.3 Moderate formalism

Nick Zangwill's moderate formalism is a version of cognitivism because it treats aesthetic properties as real properties and relies on supervenience to explain their relation to nonaesthetic properties.¹² According to Zangwill, aesthetic properties can supervene on all kinds of nonaesthetic properties, from narrow to broad, from formal nonrelational to formal relational. This brand of cognitivism is called formalism because it is possible, according to Zangwill, for an aesthetic property to supervene on only formal nonaesthetic properties. It is called moderate rather than strong formalism because the

supervenience base is not restricted to formal nonaesthetic properties. And it is called moderate rather than weak formalism because the supervenience base must include formal nonaesthetic properties. Examples of formal properties, as we have seen, are properties intrinsic to our sensory perception of the object like color, shape, texture, repetition, contrast, and so on.

Zangwill's theory of moderate formalism corners him into defending un-intuitive and rather pointless positions. For example, he has attempted to defend the view that there is no relevant distinction between plastic and real flowers, or a man in a bear suit and a real bear, for the purposes of aesthetic judgment.¹³ That is, he assumes that it is possible for knowledge of what one is looking at not to impact upon what one apprehends. There are times in Zangwill's writing where his account might verge on treating aesthetic properties as dispositional properties. Perhaps in some instances, such as when plastic flowers are felt to be as beautiful as the real thing, this is how aesthetic properties work. However, Zangwill must acknowledge that at least in some cases, background information can impact upon our experience of the aesthetic object, including plastic flowers, because he argues that broad nonaesthetic properties like background theory and knowledge can be included in the supervenience base of aesthetic properties.¹⁴

An implication of Zangwill's brand of formalism is that at least some kinds of aesthetic properties, such as those we appreciate in plastic flowers, are real properties that exist in the world, whether we are there to perceive them or not. His theory is incoherent in the same way that Parsons and Carlson's theory is incoherent. Aesthetic properties either supervene on real properties or they supervene on an imaginative characterization of the object. If aesthetic properties supervene on real properties, then all the typical principles of objectivity would obtain and the aesthetic would be eliminated. If they supervene on an imaginative characterization of the object, then our aesthetic experience of plastic flowers is unlikely to be the same as our aesthetic experience of real flowers. So either Zangwill's cognitivist version of moderate formalism eliminates the aesthetic altogether or he is wrong about the nature of aesthetic properties.

Realism about aesthetic properties is incompatible with the expressive nature of aesthetic judgment. The expressive nature of aesthetic judgment demands that if supervenience is the correct relation between aesthetic properties and their object, it is the characterization of the object that is its base, not objective properties of the object. Furthermore, the relevant characterization would defy the kind of determinate legislation imposed upon it by Parsons and Carlson. The characterization of objects for the purposes of aesthetic judgment can change from one generation to the next, and hence so do the aesthetic properties we ascribe to their object.

The only features that Parsons and Carlson's cognitivism and Zangwill's moderate formalism can accommodate without *ad hoc* moves are objectivity,

universality, and normativity, but only in as much as they treat aesthetic judgments as analogous to cognitive judgments. We have seen that treating the normativity of aesthetic judgments analogously to the normativity of cognitive judgments rules out treating aesthetic judgments as expressions of value because the basis of the normativity of cognitive judgments is that they are assertions of fact. It would also rule out the relativity of aesthetic judgments for the same reason. Furthermore, treating aesthetic judgment as a species of cognitive judgment rules out autonomy, the acquaintance principle, and subjectivity given that the typical principles of objectivity would obtain.

3. A Naturalized Account: A Critical Aesthetic Realism

Kant's aesthetic theory as developed in his *Critique of Judgment* offers us a hybrid account that incorporates cognitive elements with an expressivist core. However, his aesthetic theory has various shortcomings, as mentioned above. To salvage his account for a contemporary understanding of the aesthetic, I adapt Kant's notion of "purposiveness of form" and his "doctrine of aesthetic ideas" to contemporary conceptions of mind. What recommends this new approach is its explanatory power. That is, the result is a cohesive and coherent naturalized aesthetic theory according to which all the features mentioned above can be shown to be complementary.

In order to satisfy the cognitivist or realist intuitions we have about the object of aesthetic judgment, we need an account according to which critical reasons can be called upon to justify our aesthetic evaluations. On the other hand, the expressivist core of aesthetic judgment, and the intentional nature of the feeling involved, suggest a causal link between the perceptual object and the relevant aesthetic feeling or attitude.

In a naturalized account of aesthetic judgment, the nonverbal description or appropriate configuration of the object that lends itself to an aesthetic judgment and for which reasons can be adduced will be called the "aesthetic characterization."¹⁵ The aspect of this characterization that is causally linked to aesthetic feeling or attitude is the aesthetic form (derived from Kant's "harmony of the faculties" and his "purposiveness of form")¹⁶ or the imaginative unity. As we will see, a peculiar feature of aesthetic form explains the mental content it evokes, which we will call, after Kant, "aesthetic ideas."

3.1 *Aesthetic characterization*

Our concepts and descriptions of objects will determine at a basic level what is noticed in an object or scene and ipso facto will determine the object's potential for aesthetic judgment. For example, imagine that after having enjoyed the beauty of a particular landscape, you were told that in fact it

was a fake landscape set up as part of an extended Disneyland. Zangwill might argue in the light of the plastic flower case discussed earlier that the object remains the same for aesthetic judgment. However, I would argue that after learning this new fact, because our characterization of the landscape is determined by background knowledge and belief, the object would present a new perceptual object to aesthetic judgment and hence evoke a new aesthetic response.

“Landscape” is arguably an aesthetic concept to begin with, and when applied to a scene, it conjures up various landscape genres conducive to aesthetic appreciation. For example, often notions about our unity with nature are to the fore in our apprehension of something as landscape. In contrast, knowing that the scene is constructed by people who intend a particular effect would change its connotations for us completely. It would alter its salient aspects and consequently change the object of aesthetic judgment.

When we defend aesthetic judgments, the critical reasons we invoke apply to the aesthetic characterization. However, whether or not the characterization of an object is conducive to aesthetic pleasure is not within our direct control. It depends on whether the way we have characterized the object gives rise to the apprehension of aesthetic form or the imaginative unity. It is this form or unity and its relation to the aesthetic characterization that explains the autonomy of, and the centrality of feeling or attitude to, aesthetic judgment, without undermining its objectivity, universality, normativity, and the possibility of genuine aesthetic disagreements.

3.2 *Aesthetic form*

We can apply certain heuristics in an attempt to experience an object aesthetically. An example of a heuristic that might guide aesthetic appraisal as it guides all communicative acts is what the agent *could* have intended. Another is choosing an interpretation that would imbue the object with unity and coherence. In making sense of an object, we find a way in which an object’s various components, including the agent’s intentions as evidenced in the object’s design, can be apprehended as unified. We focus on how the elements come together into this unity, and the relevant unity will operate across the top of the concepts represented by or conveyed through the object.

For example, imagine you attend a live performance of a ballet and imagine that you are a complete novice in such matters. You might be familiar with dancers on pointe through photography and glimpses of ballet on the television, but you are not apprized of the purpose of such distortions. It all looks artificial and aimlessly contrived. Suddenly, at the live performance at which you find yourself, a dancer who with the rest of the dancers was previously twirling around on pointe runs offstage flat-footed. You wonder whether this is part of the choreography. How would you, a novice to ballet, work out the relevance of this action? You cannot

draw upon styles or genres in ballet because you have no idea about such configurations and categories.

You continue to regard the ballet with your fullest attention. You begin to recognize certain consistencies, repetitions, and contrasts. The movements forced upon the dancers by *pointe* are very distinct. The dancers seem light as if they defy gravity. They are finely balanced so that the slightest change in posture takes on an expressive significance. After some time, another dancer runs off stage flat-footed, in the opposite direction to the previous sudden exit. You now become more confident that this action is part of the choreography. It happens again, in a direction carefully counterbalanced with the former two exits. You conclude now that these exits are meant to be a part of the choreography. The question is, do they succeed in combination with the rest of the performance to evoke an aesthetic unity—an imaginative unity redolent with aesthetic ideas? If not, you have not apprehended aesthetic form by virtue of your characterization of the performance. This sad fact would typically suggest that you had configured the ballet incorrectly. Only after a number of failed attempts at apprehending aesthetic form would one be inclined to judge the performance wanting rather than one's construal of it.

The intentional nature of artifacts always underpin aesthetic characterizations, usually implicitly. For example, when confronted with a canvas painted completely white, what bamboozles the novice is why anyone would bother to do such a thing, and on what basis anyone could value such an apparently inane object. It is not that one does not like white surfaces *per se*. It is simply that one cannot understand the object as art. Normally when looking at a human artifact, we categorize it according to function. In the case of art, we engage with its intention, or try to, under some concept of what art is.¹⁷ What we understand as the point of the object will constrain attempts to construe it in a unified and cohesive way. The guiding heuristics are the basis of the critical reasons we use to defend and make aesthetic judgments.

The link between the aesthetic characterization and aesthetic form is one where both reasons and causes interact. We give reasons for the characterization, and we point to this characterization to explain aesthetic form. But the apprehension of aesthetic form is determined by factors beyond our immediate control.

Furthermore, the apprehension of aesthetic form by virtue of the aesthetic characterization does not explain the character of an aesthetic experience. Sometimes the aesthetic characterization involves purely formal elements like tonal variations or dynamically balanced visual elements, which nonetheless can give rise to the apprehension of aesthetic form with its associated phenomenology. How, then can we explain the peculiar cognitive content that defines an aesthetic experience given that it can occur without the prompt of representational content?

3.3 *Aesthetic ideas*

I adopt Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas, but I update it by providing a mechanism for the automatic prompting of aesthetic ideas by the apprehension of aesthetic form. Consider that according to theories of consciousness that envisage the mind as a dynamic connectionist network, the overarching dynamic of the system is stabilization.¹⁸ Think of it this way. When neurological connections are activated through the perceptual channels by the kinds of stimuli for which they have receptors, we say that data is entering the system. Awareness might involve providing structure to data or fitting incoming data into the existing system. Each new datum is constituted by an activation pattern, which is connected to larger networks of such patterns. Through experience we build up a complex system of such patterns.

Paul Smolensky envisages the mind as consisting of two systems, one reactive and the other simulative.¹⁹ The reactive system simply processes new incoming data, while the simulative system can generate its own patterns from previously stored data. Each pattern generated by the reactive system throws the system into a state of flux. To stabilize the system as a whole, the simulative system must either adjust existing patterns to accommodate the new data or adjust the new data to fit established patterns. We could equate these two systems to perception and cognition, respectively. For every percept, there is a concept. The structure of each new percept is constrained by concepts already existing in the system. Stabilization of the system occurs when a concept is found for a percept.²⁰

Now in the case of aesthetic judgment, we have an experience presumably involving concepts, an aesthetic characterization of some aspect of it, and in some cases an imaginative unity arising from this. There is no concept matching the imaginative unity; no concept for what we actually apprehend as aesthetic form. We have only a percept: an imaginative unity. This would put the system into a destabilized state, yet the system does not signal the end of a perception or cognition until stabilization is achieved. The dynamics here would be to find a way to stabilize the state of the system by finding a concept for the particular instance of aesthetic form. However, the system cannot simply match the percept with just any concept because this would make the system unreliable. Constraints of uniqueness and noncontradiction ensure that this does not happen. Instead, the system matches the percept-with-no-concept with a concept-with-no-percept. The latter are ideas like freedom, immortality, and infinity.

While we can think these ideas, we cannot experience them. However, when evoked through aesthetic form, they occur to us through imagination. As such, personal background experiences related to these themes come attached to them, as it were. Given the lack of direct experience with the referents of these ideas, their associated material drawn from memory is fragmented and intuitive rather than fully determinate. Even so, experienced

through one's own personal lens, these ideas take on a fullness and richness. They are also very compelling given that their subject matter reflects the survival imperative in the face of reason to the contrary. This leads to the evolutionary significance of aesthetic judgment.

4. The Consolations of the Aesthetic

Through envisaging an evolutionary justification for the peculiar features of aesthetic judgment we gain a more unified concept of it. Consider that the object of aesthetic pleasure is not the direct satisfaction of personal gain or appetite. As noted earlier, the object of the pleasure is not the kind of thing for which our distant ancestors would have needed to compete. In fact, aesthetic preferences converge within cultural groups, and their object is not dependent on private ownership or personal status. If our aesthetic capacity is adaptive, the evolutionary justification for it will not be directed at traits that benefit the individual at the expense of others within their community. My suggestion is that the aesthetic creates the conditions for community.

Consider that the survival instinct, in creatures with the ability to reason and reflect, would not be effective if all evolution selected for were effective food gatherers and procreators. Reason would sabotage our survival by undermining our ability to motivate constructive behavior. One does not waste time on a project whose efforts outweigh its rewards. Creatures that can reason and reflect need a buffer against their physical reality for the purposes of motivation. They need a natural compulsion for the generation of the kind of beliefs that inform what we call constructive behavior. I suggest that it is in this vein that our capacity for aesthetic experience evolved.

Aesthetic experience, through the evocation of aesthetic ideas, fuels a sense of continuity with nature and community. It keeps us outward looking as though our feelings find form in external objects of nature or artifacts made by ourselves or others in our community. Aesthetic ideas fuel belief in our part in the world. In turn, they fuel belief in constructive behavior and life. At the level of particular aesthetic judgments, we are compelled to find a point of agreement with our peers. We need to believe there is a fact of the matter, albeit one whose objective base is inaccessible to us, concerning aesthetic judgments, otherwise the aesthetic would lose its point. We care about the aesthetic judgments of those with whom we share, or would like to share, a sense of community. The point is that a shared aesthetic is the mark of our significance to each other. That we both might share knowledge of some fact is typically unremarkable; that we both find the same object truly beautiful is an occasion for comradeship.

The exploitation of this capacity by cultures and same-interest groups leads to norm-bound practices. The meaning of any particular practice is

not completely transparent to outsiders as such practices can develop well beyond their genetic origins. Nonetheless they are built upon a universal capacity and predisposition. However, it can take some effort and time before one can be in a position to characterize an object from another culture in a way compatible with those who belong to the culture of its origin. More significantly, it also requires a generous helping of goodwill.

Aesthetic experiences, unlike daydreaming and personal reverie, are not private. They bring us into contact with an evolutionary imperative—the need to feel continuous with nature rather than alienated from it and to feel continuous with community. That is, in order to function effectively, we need to behave like nodes in a network, with purposeful and constructive actions that have meaning and significance in the world. Anyone whose behavior reflects a sense of alienation from nature and community, or a sense that all their actions are but a useless expenditure of energy in a meaningless world, we treat as mentally unwell. When functionally well, we do not behave as though we are racing toward nothingness, yet this is what behavior fueled by reason and hard evidence alone would be like.

A consequence of this aesthetic theory is that aesthetic properties are not real properties, if by real properties we mean properties recognized by science. Aesthetic properties are qualities we ascribe to objects based on our feeling responses or attitudes toward them. Through the ascription of such properties, we make of our world a place amenable to us in all respects.

However, aesthetic ascriptions are not arbitrary or personal. They are constrained by the kinds of configurations that can be perceived in the object and that can give rise to aesthetic form. Furthermore, given their evolutionary role, there is a point to treating them as if they were properties of the object. They may not reveal the world to us, but they cement an adaptive orientation to it. The notion is that the world is something we can know by virtue of being something we want to encounter. In this sense, value blurs into fact in aesthetic judgment; hence the title of this paper: “critical aesthetic realism.”

5. Implications for Aesthetic Education

The aesthetic theory that emerges from a reconciliation of the various aspects of aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment supports the view that aesthetic characterizations give rise to the apprehension of aesthetic form. It is not some set of mind-independent properties unmediated by cultural understanding that is the object of aesthetic judgment but a characterization of the object influenced by background knowledge and experience. As such this theory provides a theoretical basis for the current reliance on artists' statements for understanding artworks. The artist's statement provides the concepts through which the object is configured. It determines what is psychologically salient to the viewer in the work. The aesthetic form one apprehends

will arise from this culturally mediated construal of the work. Aesthetic formalism and autonomy is shown to be not only compatible with an historically embedded understanding of the work but also reliant upon it.

Conclusion

A naturalized aesthetic theory involves three explanatory terms: the aesthetic characterization, aesthetic form, and aesthetic ideas. My update of Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas shows that the kind of ideas involved in aesthetic judgment are universal even though the intimations and other fragments through which the ideas are experienced will reflect each individual's personal experience. This account demonstrates the dynamic nature of aesthetic form. Aesthetic form does not equate with visual shape, melody, or movement. It equates with any imaginative unity that is expressive of aesthetic ideas.

By reconciling the features of aesthetic appraisals that give them the feel of genuine judgments (objectivity, universality, normativity, and so on) with those features of aesthetic experience that seem deeply personal (autonomy, subjectivity, expressiveness, and so on) we arrive at a concept of aesthetic judgment that suggests an evolutionary justification for it. This is the notion that our aesthetic capacity is a condition of community in creatures with the capacity for reflection. This reconciliation between the objective and subjective features of aesthetic judgment also suggests a notion of aesthetic properties that more aptly captures the variability we find in aesthetic judgments across cultures and epochs and between our younger and older selves. Finally, the aesthetic theory that emerges here provides the theoretical foundations to the practice of evaluating artworks in the light of supporting artistic statements.

NOTES

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (1790; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 88.
2. The "feeling" in question is a positive one; a sense of satisfaction or harmony that Kant referred to as a "disinterested pleasure." It would not be consistent with the spirit of Kant's aesthetic theory to interpret the "feeling" in question as an irreducible aspect of experience. For this reason, I think "attitude" can substitute for "feeling" here. Fred Feldman's theory of attitudinal pleasure might have a useful application in the aesthetic domain. See Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) and *Utilitarianism, Hedonism, and Desert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
3. The claim on everyone's assent is a priori, not empirical. For a discussion of this see Andrew Chignell, "Kant on the Normativity of Taste: The Role of Aesthetic

- Ideas," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 3 (2007): 415-33, in particular, 417-18.
4. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. E. Miller (1757; repr. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1987).
 5. Chignell, "Kant on the Normativity of Taste"; Anthony Savile, *Aesthetic Reconstructions: The Seminal Writings of Lessing, Kant and Schiller* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
 6. Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Eva Schaper, "Taste, Sublimity, and Genius," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 367-93.
 7. Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 8. "Absolute music" refers to music without words.
 9. Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* (Seattle: McLellan and University of Washington Press, 2000); *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992); *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).
 10. See David Bordwell's discussion of contingent universals in David Bordwell, "Convention, Construction, and Vision," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 87-107, in particular 92.
 11. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson, "New Formalism and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 4 (2004): 363-76.
 12. Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
 13. Nick Zangwill, "Formal Natural Beauty," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (2001): 209-24.
 14. Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, chap. 4.
 15. After Philip Pettit, "The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism," in *Pleasure, Preference and Value*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 17-38.
 16. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 69. According to Pluhar's translation, Kant refers to what I would call "aesthetic form" variably as "the mere form of purposiveness" (§11), the "purposiveness of the form" (§13), the "purposiveness without a purpose" and "purposiveness as to form" (§ 10), and the "subjective purposiveness in the presentation of an object, without any purpose" (§11). Kant explains what he means by these terms by contrasting them with "purposive" (§10).
 17. The above two heuristics for aesthetic characterisations, unity or coherence and artistic intention, are modelled on Philip Pettit's two constraints, which he called the holistic constraint and the humanism constraint respectively ("The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism").
 18. See Paul Smolensky and Geraldine Legendre, *The Harmonic Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); David E. Rumelhart, Paul Smolensky, James L. McClelland, and Geoffrey E. Hinton, "Schemata and Sequential Thought Processes in PDP Models," in *Parallel Distributed Processing*, ed. D. E. Rumelhart and J. L. McClelland (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 7-57; and Paul Smolensky, "Information Processing in Dynamical Systems: Foundations of Harmony Theory," in *Parallel Distributed Processing*, ed. D. E. Rumelhart and J. L. McClelland (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 194-281.
 19. Smolensky, "Information Processing in Dynamical Systems."
 20. For a more detailed discussion, see Jennifer A. McMahon, *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalized* (New York: Routledge, 2007), particularly chapters 6 and 7.