OBJECTIVITY, ANTHROPOCENTRICITY, AND AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

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Part of the great appeal of Hume’s "Of the Standard of Taste" is his juxtaposition of two "species of common sense", one having aesthetic value as obviously subjective—sentiment has reference to nothing beyond itself—while the other has it no less obviously objective—it would be mad to praise Ogilby over Milton. I take it most can find both compelling, depending on where our focus is at the time. One might hope, then, for a philosophical account of aesthetic value that, whatever the final verdict, provides insight into how or why both views can seem so compelling. One might then suspect that there must be ways to accept virtues of both views without falling into incoherence. I hope to develop such an account here drawing heavily on the work of Frank Sibley, David Wiggins, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, though without any pretense to exegesis.

Some preliminaries are in order. While we shall be developing a form of objectivism, we must be clear that it is not an objectivism scientistically conceived. ‘Objective’ has a perfectly happy use designating only what is of direct interest to the natural sciences; this will not be our use of the term. The sense of ‘objective’ that we are claiming for aesthetic properties will be worked out in more detail below. As a basic, initial characterization, we can say that ‘objective’ for us is a responsiveness to facts. Also, it is worth noting that our topic addresses only one part of what we care about in aesthetic engagement, which includes much beyond activities of description that is valuable and exciting. Our concern here, though, is whether, when we are offering aesthetic descriptions and evaluations, our predications attribute properties about which we should be realists,
whether they attribute real properties of objects. I will speak sometimes of aesthetic value, sometimes of aesthetic properties. In this paper, I simply take ‘aesthetic value’ to be a broader term. Aesthetic properties are specific aesthetic values; ‘aesthetic value’ contains the aesthetic properties one might ascribe. And as a final preliminary, I choose to focus on how this plays out in art-critical discourse as we more readily employ a wider vocabulary and more often dispute such employments than in descriptions of natural beauty, although I intend the account to apply equally to natural beauty.

We shall begin by motivating worry about the most popular form of subjectivism. In section two, we specify how we should understand ‘aesthetic property’ and highlight a couple details that will be important throughout. The third through sixth sections work out the notions of objectivity and anthropocentricity, arguing that and how aesthetic properties are both. In the final section, I briefly address the problem of disagreement.

I. AGAINST RESPONSE DEPENDENCE IN AESTHETICS

If one holds that aesthetic value is instrumental, that an object is aesthetically valuable because of its disposition to afford us pleasurable experiences, then one is committed to a response-dependence account of aesthetic value. Some instrumentalists about aesthetic value understand that they must sophisticate their view in order to avoid what Malcolm Budd calls the “heresy of the separable experience.” The worry is that on an instrumentalist view, anything affording the same experience as a particular artwork would have the same value as that artwork, reducing the value of artworks to something like the value of a drug. The artwork would be irrelevant so long as the experience could otherwise be had. Instrumentalists have avoided such heresy by pointing out that the experience of an artwork simply cannot be characterized without reference to the artwork, and
so is an experience nothing other than it could afford.¹ Surely it is true that a proper
categorization of the experience of an artwork demands reference to that artwork, but this leaves
the question as to the value of the experience unanswered: why is the experience of an artwork
valuable? One option is to say that the experience is valuable because it is of a valuable object. This
response is unavailable to an instrumentalist for whom it is circular; it would require that the artwork
derive its value from the experience it affords while the experience derives its value from the
artwork. The instrumentalist may alternatively respond by stating the obvious: the experience is
valuable because of what it is like to have it, i.e., its phenomenal character. It is, after all, taken to be
a pleasure. But this reintroduces the possibility that something other than the artwork could have the
same value. While nothing other than the artwork could afford the same experience, it is still
possible that some other experience—say, one caused by a drug—could have the same phenomenal
character, and so the same value. Instrumentalism, then, faces the dilemma of circularity or
‗heresy‘.²

To deny instrumentalism is not to deny our responses play any role at all; the concept of
aesthetic value has no purchase in a story omitting sensibilities like ours. I have just said that an
instrumentalist cannot explain the value of aesthetic experience in terms of experiencing a valuable
object on pain of circularity. This particular circularity is no threat when we say the value of an
experience derives from the object’s antecedent, final value. The discomfort of many here is, I
think, the feeling that such finalism is inconsistent with the seemingly obvious anthropocentric
nature of aesthetic value. But the incompatibility is only apparent. The compatibility of an
objectivity admitting such finalism and a strong anthropocentricity is the concern of the paper as a

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¹ See, e.g., Jerrold Levinson’s (1996: 22-24). He there also quotes in a footnote Stephen Davies making a similar move.
² The preceding argument is James Shelley’s, or my abbreviation of it (2009). All I hope for here is to motivate a
substantial suspicion of response-dependence about aesthetic value. For a thorough presentation of the argument as
well as consideration and refutation of possible responses, see Shelley’s (2009). Shelley proceeds to defend an object-
theory of aesthetic value in a very different manner than I do here.
whole; first, however, we should specify what range aesthetic value, captured in certain of our aesthetic property ascriptions, will be our focus.

II. SIBLEY AND AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

Frank Sibley is the first philosopher to give us a sustained discussion focused on the nature of aesthetic properties. His project is not one of developing or discovering a definition of ‘aesthetic property’, taking it that “one must recognize examples of one’s subject matter” in order to even get started. It might be helpful to first say what Sibley’s idea of an aesthetic property is not. One might use ‘aesthetic property’ to mean any property of an object that contributes to one’s aesthetic evaluation of it. This definition seems to me a perfectly fine, very natural definition, one that would even be preferable in some contexts. But it is not the use I, following Sibley, shall employ here. The former use can call ‘red’ an aesthetic property no less than ‘vibrant’ speaking of a painting, ‘slow’ no less than ‘somber’ in music, ‘in iambic pentameter’ no less than ‘tightly-knit’ in poetry.

For Sibley, the latter, but not the former, in each pairing is an aesthetic property. His idea is that it requires some amount of taste to see the latter properties. One can see a painting’s redness without seeing that it is vibrant, note the slow tempo and minor key without noting its somberness, &c. Sibley takes it that all that is needed for someone to grasp the distinction he wants to make is to provide a few examples. We speak of non-aesthetic properties when we say a painting uses pale colors or that it is a portrait, when we say a novel has five characters and is set in the 1930s, as well as when we speak of crescendos and ostinatos in music. These property ascriptions are not themselves suggestive of any evaluation and seem to admit unproblematically of unqualified second-hand testimony. We speak of aesthetic properties when we cite a painting’s gracefulness or

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3 Sibley preferred ‘concepts’ to ‘properties’. His preference was based on a worry about possible misunderstandings the use of the term ‘property’ might bring with it that I do not share.
garishness, a novel’s unity or serenity, a concerto’s sprightliness or a fugue’s majesty. These property ascriptions are tinged with evaluation and would be misleadingly used in describing an object based on testimony without qualification. Within the category of aesthetic terms, Sibley also distinguishes those mentioned so far in this section from what he calls *verdicts*, evaluative judgments as to something’s overall aesthetic character, such as it’s being beautiful or ugly, good or bad. I shall maintain this useful distinction.

Ted Cohen challenges the idea that taste is required to discriminate aesthetic properties. Rather than considering the challenge itself, I’d like to consider what seems to be one of its motivations. Sibley often contrasts taste with “normal senses and intelligence.” This, Cohen exploits. He presents images of three lines, one perfectly straight, one angularly scribbled, one slightly arched, and asks us which we would call ‘graceful’. He further asks if we take our judgment to have required anything beyond normal senses and intelligence. In another example, Cohen quotes Sibley’s claim that ‘lovely’ is a term with no non-aesthetic use, and then asks us the same question about the commonplace statement, “It’s a lovely day today” (1973: 130-131). I take it—as Cohen intends—most would be squeamish about claiming these judgments require more than normality.

Before pointing to a strand in Sibley’s work that reduces the distance between he and Cohen, I would like to discuss what might make one suggest that aesthetic judgments require more than normal senses and intelligence to begin with. The main reason is simply that one can see an object full well and yet not notice its aesthetic qualities. (2001: 14, 38) Wittgenstein provides a rather fun expression of this idea: “If you feel the seriousness of a tune, what are you perceiving?—Nothing that could be conveyed by reproducing what you heard.” (PI II: 179) It seems there can be no better way of showing someone something than reproducing it for them. But with aesthetic

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4 ‘According to her, it is graceful.’ ‘I hear it is (or it is supposed to be) quite delicate.’
properties, this may not suffice. We might sit together attentive to the very same performance, and yet as we leave I may be surprised to hear you speaking of its seriousness or solemnity or melancholy. I enjoyed the piece, but noticed no such things.

The problem with contrasting taste with normal senses and intelligence is that taste just is part of such normality. Taste is doubtless a skill that can be developed; borrowing Hume’s vocabulary, delicacy of taste can be developed through practice and comparisons. And one possessing delicacy of taste can doubtless discriminate properties the unpracticed cannot. But taste should itself be thought of as part of normal senses and intelligence. Sibley acknowledges this. The closing line of his celebrated “Aesthetic Concepts” claims that if we could not be brought to see aesthetic qualities by critical methods, “this would prove us lacking in one characteristically human kind of awareness” (2001: 23). A necessary condition for acquiring an aesthetic vocabulary is our natural tendency to be drawn to certain phenomena, to react with delight or repulsion, admiration or aversion. Children exhibit this tendency in their reactions to spectacular sunsets or autumn leaves or by skipping or laughing or clapping along with music. We take advantage of these situations by simply applying to them the most fundamental aesthetic terms such as beautiful, pretty, or lively. “[W]ithout this natural tendency,” Sibley notes, “our training would get nowhere” (21).

Uncharitably, in light of the foregoing we could accuse Sibley of inconsistency. I recommend, however, accommodating him by taking his remarks about taste requiring more than “normal senses and intelligence” to have an implicit “strictly speaking” occasioned by thoughts about how we can miss aesthetic properties despite irreproachable functioning of our five senses, and then emphasizing his valuable emphasis on taste as a natural human capacity. The latter, along with the idea that taste needs to be trained or developed will be important points for us throughout.

Too strictly. If not to the senses and intelligence (and affect—holistically), to what would we attribute taste? I do not think one could spell out the “strictly speaking” without rendering violence to human nature. Many do, though, and so various “faculty objections” stubbornly persist.
III. WIGGINS AND SENSIBLE SUBJECTIVISM

We turn now to the work of David Wiggins. In “A Sensible Subjectivism?,” Wiggins develops his ‘subjectivism’ by following as far as possible Hume’s immensely valuable “Of the Standard of Taste” while working out what he thinks to be a tension it contains. Hume’s essay is largely driven by a now familiar analogy:

If, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence derive an idea of the perfect beauty; in like manner as the appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health, is denominated their true and real colour, even while colour is allowed to be merely a phantasm of the senses. (1985: 234)

For Hume, the equivalent of a man with healthy eyesight for perceiving beauty is the “true judge,” one with “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.” The “joint verdict” of judges characterizable in this way “is the true standard of taste and of beauty” (241). A circularity here threatens that we will soon address, but we should first identify the tension. Hume insists that “it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings,” i.e., feelings of delight in beauty (235). This could be considered the most important thought to sensible subjectivism; but Wiggins thinks this statement, along with Hume’s analogy to healthy perceptual organs, has “no clear place in his official theory” (1987: 194). The claim is too strong for one who thinks beauty is only in the breast, is gilding or staining of objects with sentiment, a phantasm of the senses, &c. Wiggins’ account is one that preserves Hume’s estranged thought.6

Wiggins’ strategy for dealing with the circularity in what can be called the Humean idea of aesthetic properties—that an object has a particular aesthetic quality iff true judges agree that it does—is to, in some sense, accept it. “Circularity as such,” he tells us, “is no objection to it, provided that the offending formulation is also true” (1987: 189). The thought is that it is

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6 I do not believe Wiggins is reading Hume correctly here, but that is not what is presently at issue for us.
unacceptable as an *analysis* or *definition*, but useful, even demanded, for *elucidation*. His example is instructive. Compare the following circular statement of ‘sameness’: “If \( x \) is the same as \( y \), and if \( y \) is the same as \( z \), then \( x \) is the same as \( z \)” True enough; but as an analysis or definition it won’t do. ‘Same’ cannot appear in this manner in a definition of ‘sameness’. But neither is it worthless. It is useful in helping someone grasp the concept, useful in explanation, in elucidation. As we develop Wiggins’ proposed ‘subjectivism’, we will need to see how the Humean circle is true, and unproblematically so, as well as why the circularity is *demanded* by a proper understanding of aesthetic judgment.

Understanding aesthetic properties as Wiggins does begins with a speculative genealogy of aesthetic predicates. In it, we begin grouping together objects that we regularly respond to in similar ways. As these groupings are formed because of the reactions the objects cause, the names we attach to the groupings are “avowedly anthropocentric.” The names begin to operate as property terms, the property being what is common to the group, a commonality not specifiable otherwise than in terms of our responses. “Amusement for instance is a reaction we have to characterize by reference to its proper object, via something perceived as funny… And equally there is no saying what exactly the funny is without reference to laughter or amusement or kindred reactions” (1987: 195). We should stress with Wiggins that if this is correct, purely introspective accounts of amusement or any of the other responses are unavailable. As the property terms’ roots grow deeper and more securely into the language, it will become possible to dispute whether something genuinely belongs in the grouping, whether it genuinely has the property. E.g. Is this *funny*, or just silly? This feature, their contestability, will be essential in enabling them to take root and flourish in the language. The questions here are normative; they are questions of appropriateness, of whether the object *merits* the response as well as whether the response is appropriate for the sort of thing it is
directed upon. We’ll have more to say about this when we discuss the vindication of aesthetic judgments.

The structure of what is beginning to emerge can be seen as a sort of synthesis of the opposing sides of a Euthyphro dilemma. In an aesthetic context, then, rather than taking a side we say it is true both that (1) we value $x$ because we find $x$ beautiful, and also that (2) $x$ is beautiful because it is such that we value it. ‘Because,’ here, is not univocal. (1) can be taken at face value: our finding $x$ to be beautiful is the reason we value it. (2) taken at face value would be a crude subjectivism or response-dependence theory and cannot obviously be combined in any coherent, non-viciously circular way with (1). Wiggins’ gloss on (2) tailored to the aesthetic case is this: Such valuing by human beings directed in this way is one part of what is required for there to be such a thing as the perspective from which the beauty of $x$ is there to be perceived (1987: 106). With care, the latter can be spelled out in a way consistent with (1). Consider the phrase, “part of what is required for there to be such a thing as the perspective from which…” Human interest here is constitutive of a particular perspective, a perspective without which there is no beauty to speak of. How can this thought possibly be accepted while denying subjectivism? By demonstrating how this perspective provides a genuine mode of access to the world. Thomas Nagel put the suggestion nicely when recommending that we might need to resist the “voracity of the objective appetite,” scientifically conceived, as “perhaps the best or truest view is not obtained by transcending oneself as far as possible” (1979: 211-212). Seeing how such a perspective can earn a right to claims of truth about the world coincides with seeing how aesthetic judgments are to be vindicated. To that we now turn. The following three sections are in service of working out the details introduced in this paragraph.

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7 I intend ‘find’ factively here. We could equally say, “we value $x$ because $x$ is beautiful.” I prefer the personal verb as an object may be beautiful and yet we do not value it due to our failure to see that it is. When we come to see its beauty, when we, so to speak, find its beauty, we will then value it because it is beautiful.
Proceeding, it is important to recognize that there will be two parts to what we are discussing: vindication and vindicatory explanation, the senses of both will be detailed below. The importance of highlighting the difference lies in the fact that much of what will be said of vindication—our practices in justifying our aesthetic claims—can be held by realists and anti-realists alike. Vindicatory explanation is the further step from a vindicated aesthetic claim to realism. The discussions interweave, though, as vindication is not only a prerequisite for vindicatory explanation in this way, but also as our practices of vindication ensure that our aesthetic claims are of a kind that can admit of vindicatory explanation. In the terms just used, while vindication deals with the ‘invention’ and regulation of the perspective from which we make aesthetic claims, vindicatory explanation defends this as a genuine mode of access to the world.

Wiggins explicates his notion of vindicatory explanation with reference to how we secure objectivity for arithmetical judgments, the latter being similar to aesthetic judgments in that they are not empirical judgments, dissimilar in that they are uncontroversial. We explain the consensus in belief that $7+5=12$, for example, by showing that for these reasons—fill in the blank with relevant proofs or calculations—“there is really nothing else to think.” Generally, the belief that $p$ is vindicated if our best explanation for how one comes to believe that $p$ is precisely because $p$, i.e., if the best explanation for the belief makes the positing of $p$ explanatorily indispensable (1990/1: §V). The vindication aims to show that given the reasons it sees fit to cite, there is really nothing else to think other than $p$. As Wiggins most concisely puts it, “vindicatory explanations at once justify a
belief, as the only belief that is open to one who understands what is at issue, and also, by reference
to that, explain the belief’s coming into being” (1996: 283, n.52).

In the arithmetical case, vindicatory explanation is easy enough since we have a
demonstrative proof to offer as our reason. When an aesthetic judgment is at issue, what shape
must the explanation take? Nothing comparable to an arithmetical proof is available, and it isn’t
obvious how reasons come in to play here given the immediacy of aesthetic perception. 10 There is
only one notion of proof in aesthetics—what Sibley conveniently calls a ‘perceptual proof’—which
is serviceable here; it also brings with it a serviceable notion of the role of reasons.

Sibley’s idea of a perceptual proof is as simple as it sounds. Should one doubt my claim that
an object is blue, the best I can do to prove my claim to her is to ask her to look for herself, perhaps
bringing it into better light. When one doubts my claim that a painting is delicate, typically there is
much more to do than to bring it into better light; but if I can get her to see the delicacy for herself,
then “I have vindicated my claim in the best possible way” 11 (2001: 39). Indeed, bringing others to
see for themselves is a goal of critical discourse—whether professionally or amongst friends—and
having a talent for finding ways to bring others to see is a cardinal virtue for critics.

One important part of the activity leading to perceptual proof is that of giving reasons,
reasons citing what it is about an object that gives it its aesthetic character. These reasons do not,
however, support the aesthetic judgment discursively. They are explanatory reasons, comparable
with saying that the reason two stones do not fit snugly together is that one is slightly convex. One
can similarly say that the reason a painting is graceful is its gently curving lines. This does not,
however, mean descriptions of the curving lines can play the role of premises in an argument leading

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10 On ‘immediacy’, see note 12 below.
11 Notice that we have here shifted away from vindicatory explanation to vindication.
to the conclusion that the object is graceful. Another’s citation of reasons for something’s aesthetic character often acts as what brings us to see it for ourselves; but, to echo Sibley’s caution, “an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called reasoning” (2001: 40). Explanatory reasons are typically contrasted with justificatory reasons. Here, explanatory reasons serve as justification—not by any alien logic, but by their ability to inform and so improve one’s perception. Agreement remains the ultimate arbiter.

Giving the reasons for an object’s aesthetic character, it should be noted, is only one of many things a critic might do to bring another to see. We might also employ metaphors, similes, comparisons, give background information, make apt gestures, and much else. Remember, though, battle-tested subjectivists can embrace most everything we have said about perceptual proof. Getting people to see objects in a certain way is no less a part of their story. Realism or objectivism requires the further claim that the way of seeing things brought about is seeing things as they really are. Part of what enables this further claim is that the critical practices that bring others to see serve another purpose: refining aesthetic claims into something that can admit of vindicatory explanation.

V. APPROPRIATENESS AND CRITICISM

Recall now our speculative genealogy in which we group objects according to our responses to them, also naming the grouping with reference to the response, the name coming to operate as a property term. One might worry that claiming objectivity for such anthropocentric properties cannot guard against counting any actual response as a true representation of reality. There is, after all, no perspective outside that from which the judgment is made by which it could be verified. But what it is for an object to have the proposed property is not for it simply to occasion some response,

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12 This largely exhausts the content of how I intend ‘immediacy’—that aesthetic judgments are not mediated by logical steps. This, I take it, is what motivates Sibley’s talk of aesthetic judgments not being condition-governed, a point made well by Cohen in the final section of his (1973).

13 Sibley adumbrates such activities well at (2001: 17-19).
but to be such as to merit it. The sense of appropriateness that is at issue allows criticism to get purchase. Does the object to which we respond thusly really merit the response? And what does such a response suggest about what an object must be like to merit it? Critical scrutiny allows us to sharpen our abilities to distinguish the Φ from near misses, etc. But as the property is being such as to merit a certain response, refining our responses alters what property ascriptions are available to us. Actual responses not admitting of reasons withstanding criticism of their appropriateness—whose appropriateness cannot be sufficiently established to allow for an adequate amount of convergence in scrutinized judgments—cannot develop a public sense, and so cannot come to admit of truth. The latter two points will be discussed below, after first developing relevant notion of appropriateness of response to property in aesthetics.

One might worry that it is not obvious how criticism takes hold with many aesthetic terms. From where could criticism find its idea of appropriateness? I think we can answer this question by combining an observation about the nature of aesthetic terms with the following familiar picture of aesthetic discourse described by Wittgenstein:

> It is possible—and this is important—to say a great deal about a fine aesthetic difference.—The first thing you say may, of course, just be: “This word fits, that doesn’t”—or something of the kind. But then you can discuss all the extensive ramifications of the tie-up effected by each of the words. That first judgment is not the end of the matter, for it is the field of force of the word that is decisive. *(PI II: 186)*

The relevant observation is Sibley’s suggestion that “the qualities… that can be admired aesthetically for themselves must be the ones which somehow, putting aesthetic questions aside, are vitally involved in human experience” (2001: 31). Most terms we use in aesthetic discourse have uses connected to non-aesthetic aspects of life, aspects we care about. Some aesthetic predicates are themselves metaphorical, some ‘quasi-metaphorical’, some have taken on an independent life of their own, yet etymologically have metaphorical uses in their history. These connections cannot be severed without rendering violence to the sense of the terms. Sibley cites Stuart Hampshire as having described a “colony of aesthetes, disengaged from practical needs.” Hampshire imagines that
these aesthetes would have a purely direct, non-metaphorical critical vocabulary. But Sibley’s claim is that if their terms “were more completely ‘disengaged from practical needs’ and other non-aesthetic awarenesses and interests, they would perforce be blind to many aesthetic qualities we can appreciate” (2001: 17). Take ‘dynamic’ as an example.\textsuperscript{14} Competence with the term’s use in non-aesthetic discourse is necessary for our eyes or ears to be opened to the dynamic in aesthetic contexts; “the very point is that we are noticing aesthetic qualities related to their literal or common meanings.” We come to ‘see the same face,’ so to speak, in the dynamic things of art as we see in the dynamic things of life. This is one reason that sometimes all a critic has to do to bring us to see a particular aesthetic quality is simply use the word; we already have some idea of what we are looking for (cf. 2001: 20).

To keep things in perspective, it might be valuable to observe that much of what is involved in the metaphorical extension of terms just described is far from unique to the aesthetic sphere; it is commonplace throughout language. Let’s borrow an example Cavell uses in a different context.\textsuperscript{15} Our introduction to the use of ‘feed’ typically comes from “feed the cat,” “feed the dog,” “feed the baby,” &c. Yet when we later hear, say when parking downtown, “feed the meter,” or after hearing someone praised, “feed his pride,” we are hardly mystified. We needn’t use the word ‘feed’ in either case, but we lose something if we don’t. We could say, “‘put money into the meter;” but the sense of this expression doesn’t by itself distinguish between, say, ‘putting’ something into the meter in the sense of replacing a malfunctioning gear on the one hand, and on the other ‘putting’ something into the meter which keeps it running only for a while, which must be continually repeated to delay expiration (and upon expiration, especially in Chicago, there is Hell to pay). And speaking of ‘feeding pride’ indicates that it is something that can grow, that has a healthy state which suffers

\textsuperscript{14} As applied to, say, painting. Thinking of dynamic as applied to music is fine, too, so long as we note I am not speaking of the technical term referring to crescendos, diminuendos, &c.

\textsuperscript{15} The Claim of Reason, pp. 181–83.
unique consequences upon being under or over fed. There is an appropriateness of the term ‘feed’ to these new uses; Cavell describes this as the circumstances “inviting” or at least “allowing” the extending of the term. The circumstances, of course, must be taken as a whole: stuffing peanuts into the meter’s coin slot is no more feeding the meter than is giving a child a quarter. What counts as ‘food’ depends on what is being ‘fed’, &c. The caution is perhaps best put, “the similarity in ‘face’ is not a straightforward similarity in ‘features’.”

Linguistically, then, there is nothing out of the ordinary when non-aesthetic terms are extended metaphorically into aesthetic contexts. What is unique, and what raises some eyebrows, is the idea that the extended terms refer to real properties of objects and that the metaphoricality of the term’s use is essential to perceiving the property. Regarding the latter, Roger Scruton asks us to imagine someone who classifies a group of artworks exactly as we do when picking out the works that are sad, who displays full competence with the concept ‘sadness’ with regard to people, and yet denies that the set of works he groups together that we call sad are sad. Whatever je ne sais quoi by which he classifies them, he deems it foolish to call it sadness—artworks have no mental states—and claims to see no connection between sadness and the quality common to these works. I think we should agree with Scruton that it would be odd for us to say that this man has classified the artworks by seeing their sadness—as we would say of someone who consistently picks out all red objects that he classifies them according to their redness despite his calling them ‘hot’—because seeing the connection between the artworks and the emotional state is somehow part of seeing their sadness (1974: 39).

Scruton uses this example as part of an argument against any flat-footed objectivist view that holds aesthetic properties to be simple perceptual properties in any way that severs (or allows for

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16 The phrase is Kelly Dean Jolley’s (2007: 103, emphasis added). The discussion from which I take this phrase is important for us below.
severance) any connection with the sense of the words when used to speak of non-aesthetic properties. We may ask on behalf of such a view—our purposes not being to defend it, but only to reinforce an earlier point—for more detail as to what we are to imagine. Would this man also insist that it is foolish to say that we ‘feed’ meters given that meters do not eat? If so, it seems we have bigger problems regarding his use of language generally that must be answered before we could even begin to get a grasp of what might be going on in Scruton’s example. And if he has no problem speaking of ‘feeding’ meters simply because they don’t eat, how is it that an artwork not having states of mind still counts for him as a reason to think it nonsense to call them ‘sad’? It can be no objection against realism in aesthetics that there are irrational people. Scruton’s example can be altered to serve his purposes. As presented it seems to miss the ubiquity of metaphorical extensions throughout language.

Scruton’s objection does not strike against a realist view like the one we are developing; and this he acknowledges (1974: 42). Saying *why* it doesn’t provides a useful expository tool. Any view against which Scruton’s objection would have any force would be one where a quality is picked out and classified prior to any affective or valuational response then attached to it as a member of that class. Such separability of classification and response is not possible on our view. Our responses are themselves the awareness of the qualities, are themselves classificatory. One might worry here that saying this would require that there is a unique and identifiable phenomenology for ‘graceful’, for ‘dynamic’, for ‘delicate’ and so on. I think this only seems problematic if one is thinking about aesthetic responses as something that could be given purely introspective descriptions. If we keep in mind that our responses can only be characterized with reference to the objects to which they are responses, there is nothing more surprising in the claim that aesthetic responses have unique

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17 The ‘priority’ is logical priority; the response could be simultaneous and the view would still fall prey Scruton’s objection. It is the separability of classification and response that is important.
phenomenologies than in the claim that encounters with different objects have unique phenomenologies. In aesthetic experience, coming to a satisfactory characterization of the object is at once coming to a satisfactory characterization of our response. Refining our understanding of, and responsive competence with, aesthetic values through critical discourse is in an important sense refining ourselves. An observation that might bring clarity here is that the concept of ‘stepping back’ gets no purchase in aesthetic judgment. Where we might take a visual experience of redness at face value to begin with but then question it, note bad lighting, and come think that it only looks red though it isn’t, all while the visual experience remains constant, in contrast, questioning and adjusting our aesthetic judgments must happen, so to speak, within the response. If during contemplation of the object we move from characterizing it as powerful to characterizing it instead as maudlin, we do so only as our response shifts. The logic of ‘looks’ loses its grip here.

We are pressing toward understanding how insisting on one word rather than another can amount to saying a great deal about a fine aesthetic difference. The unity of characterizing an object and characterizing our aesthetic responses is an important element. There is a range of aesthetic predicates, however, for which it is far from obvious what precisely it would mean to say that employing them characterizes our response. What is it to have a ‘dynamic’ or ‘graceful’ or ‘delicate’ response? To understand this, we must consider the ‘forms’ of anthropocentricity found in aesthetic judgment. Wiggins develops the view I am drawing on with reference to the funny, the shocking, the delightful, &c., properties whose anthropocentricity is clearly marked, being distinguished by amusement and shock and delight, &c. When we move to aesthetic judgments using emotion terms such as ‘sad’ or ‘angry’, the anthropocentricity is obvious in one sense, but there must be a

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18 Herein lies a reason why a proper understanding of aesthetic judgment will demand we accept a kind of circularity. Referring, of course, to Wilfrid Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1997: §§III, IV). It is this idea, I think, that is behind Wiggins’ difficult remarks that our responses are themselves “nothing less than an act of judging a content” and “[are] not that by which we tell. It is part of the telling itself.” (1987: 208)
difference as we do not distinguish sad artworks by being sad. Further, when we think of predicates like ‘dynamic’, even the initial anthropocentricity possessed by ‘sad’ is lost.

The anthropocentricity we seek is to be found in human interest combined with metaphorical extension of terms. Recall Sibley’s suggestion that qualities that we value aesthetically are those suggestive of non-aesthetic qualities that are “vitality involved in human experience.” He carries on to say “awareness of and concern with warmth, light, brilliance, clarity, purity, regularity,… and simplicity go deep into human life and interests… [W]e cannot survive without warmth, peace, energy; we cannot avoid anger, violence, fear; and we concern ourselves deeply over purity, clarity, and simplicity” (2001: 31). Making the same point from the opposite direction, he notes that “if someone professed aesthetic admiration for equiangular or elliptical appearances as such, this would not mark an unusual, seldom met with sensitivity on his part; we should not understand him” (32). It is because of the importance of and our interest in the dynamic things of non-aesthetic life that we can come to see the dynamic in art and other aesthetic contexts. Now, a Kandinsky canvass, for example, is clearly immobile; herein lies the importance of metaphorical extension, and here is where we earlier spoke of ‘seeing the same face’. We see in Kandinsky a quality that we respond to in a way bearing a family resemblance to our responses to the dynamic in non-aesthetic life. Naturally, we dub that quality ‘dynamic’. The question is unanswerable, but it is perhaps not without all instruction to ask ourselves how we might respond to the work of Kandinsky in a world permeated by sloth. I should state, laying bare an assumption, that I take it that being struck by and taking interest in similarities is simply something we in fact do. One could perhaps demand of a complete account an explanation for this. So our account is incomplete. Also, one could deny the assumption. But then one has work to do in explaining much more than our use of aesthetic terms, such as why we so naturally speak of ‘feeding’ meters and pride.
We may here contrast the anthropocentricity we have been developing with regard to aesthetic properties with the anthropocentricity of color. The latter is due to the dependency of color perception on our need for certain properly functioning ‘machinery’, and normativity goes no further than basic perceptual normativity. There is no sense in saying that the properties of objects responsible for their colors “make appropriate” or “merit” our perceptual responses; it is only a matter of health and causality. The normative notion of merit, however, is essential to an understanding of aesthetic engagement. Some have objected to Wiggins’ account for providing no way for these terms to get any traction, have objected he has left the account at too abstract of a level. The claim here is that the sense of appropriateness of response to property is grounded in the concept of its non-aesthetic relative.

One may be impatient with all this talk of connection to non-aesthetic aspects of life given the glaring counterexamples such as the paradigm aesthetic term, ‘beautiful’. The claim must be tempered, then. Recall now Sibley’s discussion of the need for certain natural tendencies without which the formation of an aesthetic vocabulary could never get started. Beauty compels us; ugliness repels. The pleasantness and discomfort of some of our responses that I take as a fundamental datum of human being is expressed in our more generic, broadly evaluative aesthetic terms—verdict terms. Our more specific aesthetic terms are expressions of these (dis)pleasures articulated with reference to the object, are articulations of the particular way in which the object is beautiful or otherwise aesthetically valuable. The latter terms are those wrought from metaphorical extension, the former are terms directly related to the natural responses that are the foundations of cultivating aesthetic sensibility.

20 See, for example, D’Arms and Jacobson (2000).
21 In general, anyway. Arguably, morally repugnant actions presented beautifully can be very repulsive, and ugliness in the right context is quite compelling, even beautiful. Also, we do have experiences—again, how to understand what is going on in such cases is arguable—such as that described by Coleridge in “Ode to Dejection”: “I see them all so excellently fair, I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!” But we need not entertain those arguments here.
VI. THE ROLE OF AGREEMENT

We have been speaking of vindication for aesthetic judgments, the roles criticism plays in that, and how the refining of our responses is the refining of ourselves. The last point, of course, is part of what is important in Hume’s description of true judges we long ago mentioned. There, we noted that a circularity threatens the Humean idea of aesthetic properties—that an object has a particular aesthetic quality iff true judges agree that it does. The latter is often offered as a definition for aesthetic properties on response-dependent accounts. Agreement is then constitutive. Such a view falls prey to the circularity. Our view is one that accepts the circularity, but offers it for elucidation rather than definition. The Humean appeal to agreement is for us merely epistemic. If we know what the true judges jointly deem beautiful, we know what is beautiful just as if we know what things the gods love, we know what things are pious. The latter is not a claim that the gods’ love makes those things pious; our Humean claim is analogous. We have also claimed that agreement nevertheless has a vital role in determining aesthetic value. We must now explain what that role is.

When Wiggins imagines an objector persisting in her demand for an account of how agreement in responses can “decide what really is Φ or not Φ,” he resorts to a passage in Philosophical Investigations to explain that the only sort of agreement that is in question in the discussion of what is really Φ is “agreement in susceptibility to respond thus and so to Φ things” (1987: 205). We shall do the same:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language that they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life. (§241)

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments… It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurements. (§242)

22 YOU SOMEHOW LOST THE CITATION TO SHELLEY HERE… TRACK THAT DOWN
In §240, Wittgenstein remarks that lack of dispute enables mathematicians to get on with their business, say, in making calculations or giving descriptions using mathematical concepts. When his interlocutor asks if he is saying human agreement decides what is true, Wittgenstein offers a way of understanding the suggestion that renders it true to his claim. It is not agreement in opinion—agreement over what propositions to assent to—that decides truth. The agreement somehow determinative of truth is agreement in judgments, in language, in form of life. How this agreement is determinative is that it enables claims to be made such that they can even be so much as true or false. Agreement that particular claims are true or false does not directly determine truth or falsity; rather, agreement in language is the basis for any claim to be possibly true or false, i.e., to have objective purport. Importantly, though, the latter sort of agreement could not come about if no one ever agreed in opinion, if a certain constancy were never attained.  

It is worth noting, returning to aesthetics, that the interpretation of the interlocutor’s suggestion that Wittgenstein rejects would be the response-dependence about aesthetic value that we long ago found reason to reject. The move from agreement in actual responses to agreement in susceptibility to respond in a particular way parallels the move from agreement of opinions to agreement in language. And just as “what we call ‘measuring’ is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurements,” our aesthetic terms could never acquire a stable sense if there were not sufficient agreement in aesthetic judgment. Critical discourse, then, in aiming at establishing such agreement, makes it a practice that invests our aesthetic terms with the senses they have, in turn “fixing what truths we shall be able to give expression to” (1987: 350).

The view we have been trying to develop is one that allows us to say both that (1) we value $x$ because we find $x$ beautiful, and also that (2) $x$ is beautiful because it is such that we value it. To do

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23 My understanding of this passage is largely shaped by Jolley (2007: 99-104), whom I am following very closely here.

24 Such sense-giving, of course, is not an explicit aim of critical discourse; it is rather something of a byproduct. Also, the senses of our aesthetic vocabulary today are largely set, though doubtless remain open to evolution.
this, we saw that we needed to be able to say how human interest could be constitutive of a perspective apart from which beauty is not there to be perceived, and yet a perspective that is a genuine mode of access to the world. The perspective is that found in our shared form of life, no small part of which is the shared senses of our language. We must remember that our aesthetic vocabulary is formed via our responses; criticism that alters the senses of our aesthetic terms then involves alteration in our responses, alteration in ourselves. Further, our responses are such that they cannot be properly characterized apart from reference to what they are a response to, which is part of how critical regulation of our aesthetic claims ensures that they acquire senses admitting of vindicatory explanation. When we consider what best explains the successes of criticism, best explains our convergence in our aesthetic judgments, what we find is that a denial of the values attributed in those judgments is inconsistent with that explanation. An adequate self-understanding in this area of our lives demands, borrowing McDowell’s words, that we “attribute, to at least some possible objects of the responses, properties that would validate the responses” (1998: 144). This self-understanding, that is, requires us to recognize that the reason we come to believe p is precisely because p. Aesthetic judgment, then, is anthropocentric in that the properties posited depend for their sense upon human sensibility trained by critical regulation in reference to the world, and whose sense is only intelligible with reference to such sensibility, and yet aesthetic judgment is objective in that responsiveness to the fact that p will be what secures its truth. At last, even if overly simple, Wiggins’ analogy illustrates how this idea works: “the size and mesh of a fisherman’s net determine what fish he will catch, if he catches any; not what fish are in the sea” (1987: 350).

VII. DISAGREEMENT

We’ve spoken much of agreement and its explanation. In response, the anti-realist will justly demand an accounting for the great lack of consensus on matters aesthetic. Unfortunately, space
constrains us to only gesture at a response. I think we should by now admit the debate where realists tout agreement and non-realists tout disagreement—both sides having a proclivity to exaggerate the favorable body of evidence for their side—is fruitless. Fruitless, though not equal: while even total agreement would not by itself win the day for realists, insufficient agreement would for anti-realists. If a property is there anyway to be seen, even if it is very demanding on qualified perceivers, we should expect convergence in judgments regarding that property. What is essential for our view has largely come to the fore in the preceding section: there must be sufficient agreement in judgments for an aesthetic term to develop a settled sense, and so possibly refer. There is no guarantee against a term seeming to get a grip yet failing to do so, though it is reasonable to think that our critical practices will weed such terms out as discussed above. Clearly, I think there is sufficient agreement to support and even call for realism about aesthetic properties. I take my difference with those who do not think so to be equivalent to a difference of intuitions, likely traceable back to which of Hume’s “species of common sense” one is initially most impressed by. Rather than speaking directly to these intuitions, attempting to sway them, I shall close only by specifying the disagreement most challenging for our account, and then merely listing the account’s virtues.

The challenging instances of disagreement for us or any realist are those among critics whose qualifications cannot be impugned, and where there are also no worries about fad or challenges presented by the kind of object being discussed. Tchaikovsky is the standard example, whether his work is powerful or maudlin. Importantly, critics often point to the same features of his work to support their opposing claims. We can, I think, simply relegate Tchaikovsky to a hard case, even an

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26 I have in mind, here, the challenges presented by contemporary art. Aesthetic terms have their grammar, but so do the objects to which they apply. Just as the applicability of ‘green’ to leaves has different criteria than its applicability to a car, and both have different criteria than its applicability to water, the applicability of certain aesthetic terms is often complicated not by those terms, but by the new object given us by the artist.
undecideable case. But there can only be so many hard cases before our view is threatened, and here is where discussion of disagreement relative to the realism debate should focus.

The chief virtue of the account developed here that it is one that allows us to restore beauty to its traditionally venerated association with truth and goodness as final values, a worthy desideratum, I think. Also, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience is that of a confrontation with value. Some antirealists have offered convincing reinterpretations of this experience worth taking seriously, but I do think it is preferable to take such experience at face value if possible, and we can. A realist account, as we mentioned above, seems true to our most natural self-understanding, that we inhabit a world in which beauty—and gracefulness, vibrancy, delicacy, &c.—is there to be found. Yet with our form of realism, we need not give up the thought that such things make no sense without reference to sensibilities like ours. And with this, we hold on to important aspects of both species of common sense.
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