



Symposium on The Space That Separates: A Realist Theory of Art

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REVIEW

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Editor's Note

Thanks to the initiative of Alan Norrie, we are pleased to present here a symposium on Nick Wilson's book *The Space that Separates: A Realist Theory of Art*. Several authors have contributed their thoughts on the book, and Nick Wilson ends the symposium with his response.

1. Aesthetic experience and the politics of art

Introduction

There are many things I love about Nick Wilson's book *The Space That Separates*. Above all, it stimulates the reader to think about big questions: What is experience? What is art? What is beauty? How do they relate to human flourishing? The book is also spectacularly ambitious, warm, human, literate, wide-ranging and well informed about the philosophical literature, and it is written with sophistication yet still sparkingly readable. Fascinating topics, then, approached with verve and style. But I'm afraid I don't agree with most of the answers Wilson offers to the big questions he poses for us. My disagreements fall into two main groups: concerns about the plausibility of his core concepts, and his neglect of art's social positioning in a system of inequality.

What is experience?

The most fundamental concept in Wilson's argument is experience, and yet he seems unable to pin down the meaning of his core term. His summary on pages 61–2 positions experience simultaneously as 'the human capacity for cognitive ... knowledge gained through interaction with our environment'; as an entity formed from a related set of parts where the parts are 'the properties and powers of objects we interact with in our environment, our own properties and powers as experiencers, and emergent properties and powers pertaining to the relations between these parts'; as 'an event (or series of events), possessing emergent causal properties, which we can, and tendentially do, experience' (which means that we can experience our experience); and as 'both a real emergent phenomenon and a phenomenon possessing real emergent properties'.

But to make experience all of these things is ontologically incoherent. Capacities are not entities with parts, which are not events, and of these three ontologically different categories only the entities with parts can possess real emergent properties (Elder-Vass 2007a, 2010). It seems to me relatively straightforward to sort this out: experiences are indeed events, but they are not capacities, and they are not entities with parts and emergent properties. The capacity to gain knowledge through interaction with our environment is a causal power of human beings, but it is not experience: it is the interpreted impression we form through the interaction that is the experience, not the capacity. And while experience is certainly

produced in an interaction between our own properties and powers and those of the things we interact with, that doesn't mean that we and they jointly constitute an entity with emergent properties: this is the heart of the critical realist distinction between actual causation and real causal powers (Elder-Vass 2007b).

What is aesthetic experience?

This conceptual vagueness at the root of the argument paves the way for further looseness as the argument develops. The most striking case comes in the next stage of conceptual development: Wilson's concept of aesthetic experience. This is simultaneously extraordinarily broad and bemusingly narrow.

As he tells us, 'A primary task for any theory of aesthetic experience is to be able to account for what makes it different from experience more generally' (69). A quick look at the dictionary suggests that the aesthetic is concerned with 'the principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty' and is derived from a Greek term that refers to perception (Oxford University Press 1996, 16), and we might expect terms like these to feature in an account of what makes aesthetic experience different. But Wilson takes a very different direction and instead explicitly defines aesthetic experience as 'our emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world (the real)' (69). This immediately begs the question of when we might be-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world, and once again the answer would seem to be rather straightforward: absolutely everything we do or experience, consciously or otherwise, involves being in relation with the natural necessity of the world, the causal forces that influence every moment of our lives. So far, it would seem, Wilson's definition would seem to imply that all experience is aesthetic experience.

But there is a second part to his account of aesthetic experience: 'It is dependent upon our meta-level constellational capacity to experience beyond the actual' (62). This 'capacity to experience beyond the actual' is itself traced back to the baby's first experiences of interaction with its mother or primary carer, which Wilson calls a variety of aesthetic experience and theorizes 'as experiences of energized behaviour and constellational identity' (18) 'in which individual identities are maintained but are nonetheless joined ... and partly constituted by "the other"' (19). There is a connection here to the first word of the definition cited in the previous paragraph: Wilson appears to be arguing, in an echo of Bhaskar's work on metareality, that we have the capacity to experience an emergent non-empirical connection to others (and indeed to other objects) and that such experiences are the defining mark of the aesthetic.

He himself connects these sorts of experiences to matters of love and care (19), but ducks the next obvious question: isn't this actually a description of experiences of love and/or care, rather than a description of aesthetic experience? As far as I can see, his claim that the two are to be identified with each other is simply an assertion with no underpinning justification. It is also an assertion that flies in the face of the usual principles of how to define our terms: when we define terms in common use, our definitions should reflect the way those terms are generally understood, even if we attempt to clarify or improve upon common understandings (Elder-Vass 2020; Hodgson 2019). But even if we were to accept this bemusing substitution of love and care for beauty and taste in the definition of the aesthetic, there are still more questions to be answered. In particular: given this definition, what are the implications for which activities are to count as aesthetic? Presumably only experiences in which we feel a caring identity with some object are to count. So, perhaps, finding a symphony boring is no longer an aesthetic experience but cuddling your pet rabbit might be. Wilson himself does not illustrate the argument with examples and so I am second guessing him here. Perhaps finding a symphony boring would count as experiencing a constellational identity with it,

but if so, we seem to be heading back towards the position in which all experiences are aesthetic experiences since finding anything at all boring (or vaguely interesting, or repulsive, or amusing, etc.) would surely also start to count.

Still, the problem of how to establish what experiences are to count as aesthetic is also shared by prevailing discourses. In those the aesthetic is connected (as one might expect) to perceptions (visual or otherwise) and to evaluations of them, yet there are also undercurrents of exclusion swirling below the surface. The concepts of the aesthetic and its close relative art are implicitly associated with supposedly elevated cultural sensibilities and forms. These in turn, as Bourdieu so brilliantly exposed, are merely reflections in the cultural sphere of the symbolic power of those classes that command the resources of society and are used to devalue the tastes of the less powerful (Bourdieu 1984). Fine dining comes to be classified as an aesthetic experience, but not eating a Big Mac; listening to a string quartet in a concert hall, but not grime music on a street corner. Perhaps Wilson's desire to substitute other standards is motivated in part by a desire to democratize the aesthetic, but if so, he fails to confront this problem head on. Before I explore it further, let me discuss one more core concept: art itself.

What is art?

As Wilson argues, 'we need to account for aesthetic experience and art separately. We have aesthetic experiences outside of art. Furthermore, as much as art is dependent upon aesthetic experience, it is not reducible to it' (78). Art is a human practice, perhaps including the creative process, the artworks it produces, and the process of experiencing them. Nevertheless, art remains tightly related to the aesthetic. This is all very reasonable until art is connected back to Wilson's particular view of the aesthetic: 'I have defined aesthetic experience as our emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world ... and art as the skilled practice of giving shareable form to our aesthetic experience' (192). The consequence is that his eccentric definition of aesthetic experience leads to an equally eccentric understanding of art – as the practice of giving sharable form to our experience of being in relation to natural necessity.

Just as his definition of the aesthetic makes it extraordinarily wide, the literal implication here is that his definition of art makes it apply to an extraordinarily wide range of human activity, including for example science and engineering, which seem like quintessential cases of being in relation with natural necessity and giving that experience shareable form, in these cases as written documents or as technological artefacts. I don't for a moment believe that Wilson thinks that these things are artworks, but his definition, via his definition of the aesthetic, fails to establish coherent boundaries to what does count as an artwork.

One part of the problem is that Wilson's definitions don't do the work that definitions need to do because he is using them to do something different instead: he is using them to build a normative agenda under the guise of a theory of what art is. But because he doesn't confront the problem of what art is, he implicitly takes for granted a variety of dimensions of prevailing discourses that shape our understandings of the boundaries of art. Those discourses entail that certain classes of activity, such as painting, sculpture and certain forms of music and spoken performance count as art, and others don't. That may not seem problematic when the question at hand is whether we should exclude science and engineering from our concept of art, but it becomes much more problematic when we recognize that these discourses are not politically innocent.

Wilson is aware of this issue, but largely skirts around it. To his credit he explains clearly Owen Kelly's powerful critique of art as an ideological construction (137–8). For Kelly, art is a system in which some activities – those favoured by the metropolitan ruling class which

has the power to shape this system – have cultural value bestowed upon them which is denied to other activities. There are also passing references to other critics including Bourdieu (138). But although Wilson recognizes some value in these arguments, he introduces them primarily in order to respond that they fail to recognize the value of art (139).

The politics of art

Wilson recognizes that art and the aesthetic have often been understood in elitist and exclusionary ways and perhaps one motivation for his desire to reformulate them in such open terms is to free them of those connections. But what he fails to recognize, I think, is that these elitist boundaries are so intrinsic to contemporary understandings of art and aesthetic experience that the concepts collapse without them. We can agree that art is produced, and that it is produced to be experienced, but beyond that there is no inherent quality that distinguishes art from not-art except that art belongs to categories that are socially recognized as art. As both Kelly and Bourdieu argue, such social recognition is produced by discursive power. The most convincing answer I am aware of to the question of ‘what is art’, is that offered by Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production*: art is that which is recognized as art by the gatekeepers of the artistic field, those who are invested with the symbolic authority to consecrate works with artistic value. Art, he argues, is not only produced by painters, sculptors, composers – artists of all types – but also by ‘the producers of the meaning and value of the work – critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such, in particular teachers’ (Bourdieu 1993, 37). And those critics, publishers and other movers and shakers of the art world are themselves influenced by structures of symbolic status of different forms of culture that confer distinction upon the tastes of the dominant classes and deny it to those of the less powerful (Bourdieu 1984).

One useful index of the hierarchy of evaluations produced by these classifications is the distinction between art and entertainment, mentioned in passing by Wilson (176). Entertainment is one of the ‘others’ of art in the system of cultural distinction: it is used to dismiss otherwise artistic work that typically appeals to members of the working classes, cultural minorities, and younger people as being something less than, and something less valuable than, ‘art’, and indeed their experiences of it as something less than ‘aesthetic’. The very concept of art as it actually exists is inseparable from its employment to mark cultural forms favoured by social elites as privileged over those of more marginalized groups, and this is never really confronted in Wilson’s book.

The value of art

A critical realist theory of art, to my mind, would need to examine how fundamental structures like these are to the system of art and the discourses that underpin it. Perhaps Wilson might respond that those are matters for sociology and political theory while he is practising philosophy. But that’s not the kind of philosophy that critical realism is. Critical realism is the kind of philosophy that recognizes that our fundamental concepts exist in the transitive dimension and can only be understood adequately within the context of their social production.

That need not exclude, however, addressing other issues as well. This brings us back to Wilson’s normative agenda. One part of his argument is that art has intrinsic value, and that this is too often neglected (199). On the one hand, this is just the sort of argument that ends up supporting elitist versions of art unless we recognize that art is currently defined in exclusionary ways. On the other, if the definition of art can be widened, not by extending it


indefinitely but by bounding it in ways that do not exclude currently marginalized cultural activities, then it becomes useful to ask how it might help us all to flourish.

Wilson's argument is that the intrinsic value of art arises from its capacity to increase and deepen our interaction (199), both with the capacities of the material world and with each other. Modelling aesthetic experience on our earliest feelings of connection with our carers, he sees the space of aesthetic experience – *The Space that Separates* of the title – as 'the place where we most fully experience the life we have to live' (207). '[I]t is only through art', he says, 'through becoming more experienced at experiencing the world – that we can learn to live most fully' (206).

Even here, I'm afraid, I am unconvinced by the approach that Wilson takes. If art is defined so loosely as to include virtually all human activity, these claims are rather pointless. If it is defined more narrowly in functional terms but still widely in terms of whose activities are to count as art, they are probably wrong: there are many other human activities, including non-artistic forms of human interaction, that perform these roles just as well. If art is defined in the exclusionary form implicit in contemporary discourse, these claims are positively elitist.

If we dig deep enough, however, I think there is still a fascinating and worthwhile message at the heart of this ambitious book. It does not succeed, for me, as a book about what art is, but it is much more promising as a utopian vision of what Nick wants art to deliver for us. His message, I think, is that art should aspire to create (and its best does create) a deep sense of connection to something beyond the immediate objects of perception through which it operates.

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2. Ontology, Naturalism and aesthetic experience

Introduction

Nick Wilson's book is notable not merely because it fills a gap in critical realist literature, but because aesthetics is so important in everyday life for our well-being. Yet it is widely overlooked in most social science or treated in subjectivist, relativist and sociologically-reductionist forms. For some, the neglect might reflect a low valuation of the subject, for others – including me – a feeling that it is just too elusive to tackle. Nick has refused to be daunted by the topic and written an original and highly ambitious critical realist account of aesthetic experience and art. The main issues I want to discuss are aesthetic experience and actualism, truth, the relative gains from ontology compared to substantive naturalistic explanations, and the importance of form.

What is aesthetic experience?

'Experience' can cover a wide range of things: what we encounter; what we perceive; what we don't perceive but which still affects us in some way; or how perception and conception mingle as we reflect upon and modify what we sense, drawing upon memories and imaginings. The slipperiness of the term reflects the extraordinary busy-ness and free-ranging nature of our minds, especially when we are open to whatever there is, rather than having to deal with some specific problem that requires focus. And we need to deal with experience both as a transitive and an intransitive object, so it is treated as an emergent phenomenon of

part of the wider realm of intransitive objects. No wonder experience is so difficult to define, even before we get onto the particularly elusive kind we call aesthetic.

There is much that I found compelling in Nick's account of aesthetic experience, in particular: the relation of betweenness; the sense that there is something special and valuable about such experience; the awareness that we are having this experience ('experience of experience'); its multi-level character, resulting from the stratification of internal and external forces, some of which we do not notice, but which alter our body states nevertheless; the way it tends to give us a sense of openness and possibility that contrasts with the kind of narrowing down of possible interpretations that is involved in dealing with practical or theoretical problems. Not all these qualities are unique to aesthetic experience, however: in typing this I can make myself aware that I am in relation with my keyboard and screen, but it doesn't feel like an aesthetic experience. Mindfulness meditation also seeks a kind of experience of experience but is unlike aesthetic experience in other respects. So, it would have been helpful to have some discussion of what is not aesthetic experience and what is not only necessary for it but exclusive to it. However, identifying what aesthetic experience is, is not the same as identifying what produces it, though that experience might include some awareness of the latter, and here I have some doubts about the analysis, if I have understood it correctly.

Repeatedly, Nick claims that most accounts of aesthetic experience are 'actualist' and presuppose a flat ontology. The latter assumption is clearly inconsistent with the way in which it involves processes working at different ontological strata and with different kinds of emergence, from the physiological, to the socio-psychological and the reflexive, and with various forms of downward causation in the opposite direction, as in the case of the modification of feelings by reflection. Against actualist accounts, Nick argues that art gives an experience of being-in-relation with natural necessity, the real, with what generates what happens. I wonder about this, though a lot depends on how the real is defined. Of course, we can never escape the real or naturally-necessity, and so aesthetic experience, like anything else, must be generated by causal powers and susceptibilities grounded in objects, including ourselves and our understandings of things. But while any explanation of aesthetic experience must address these, I wonder if or how much aesthetic experience itself does go beyond the actual, that is, beyond what the activation of causal powers produces. Even though it involves processes that operate at different ontological levels, some of them beyond what we can observe, such as the effects of music on our body, it still involves the activation/actualization of those causal powers, rather than necessarily making us aware of their existence in *potentia* at the level of the real but non-actual. Even associated feelings of fullness and enchantment are effects of the actualization of causal powers. There is nothing anti- or non-realist about such an explanation, for it can still acknowledge the dependence of the actual on the real, on our stratified being, on the powers and susceptibilities of my body and of objects and cultural associations and meanings. I savour the beauty of the singer's voice, and although I could speculate on the causal powers of her vocal chords, such knowledge as I have of this comes from elsewhere – from science – and does not necessarily augment the aesthetic experience. Knowledge of relevant causal powers and structures of aesthetic objects, such as the scales being used in a piece of music or its cultural context may either enrich the aesthetic experience of their actualization or distract us from it. Our experience of the experience may also involve the creation and activation of emergent powers - new kinds of gestalt perhaps, or a sense of enchantment and enlargement of our being. We may feel a kind of energy too, but again it is the actualization of causal powers we are experiencing. Insofar as it gives us a feeling of possibility and openness, I would suggest that this doesn't have specific referents in terms of awareness of being-in-relation to specific causal powers,

just a sense of a kind of freedom. So, while we can only exist and do anything through natural necessity, I question whether our experience of being-in-relation to things engages with natural necessity in the sense of unactualized/unactivated causal powers. In other words, I suggest that while any explanation of what produces aesthetic experience must indeed go beyond the observable and the actual, it seems to me that aesthetic experience itself is still primarily of the actual, albeit at more than one ontological stratum.

Art and truth

I agree that aesthetic experiences, whether spontaneous or prompted by art works, have a characteristically open character that invites many different responses, in contrast to science, which seeks to narrow possible interpretations down to a single best one. While the ability of art and aesthetic experience to expand our sense of possibility and potential, through providing a space of play, is indeed notable, I don't see that this can be squared with the claim that it gives us an experiential relationship with truth.

In keeping with Bhaskar's concept of alethic truth, defined as the causal mechanisms of the world and hence as a predicate of things rather than propositions, we can acknowledge that when such mechanisms are activated our brain-body (and its mechanisms) may be affected. But that is no more true of aesthetic experience than it is of what happens when we take a walk or have a conversation. In both these and other mundane practices we may have a 'feeling of what happens', as Damasio, puts it (1999), so in some ways we sense our being-in-relation to whatever is going on, but knowledge claims about alethic truth remain fallible (see Groff 2000). Regarding music, one can also accept Ferdia Stone-Davis's claim, cited approvingly by Nick, that music 'turns the subject outwards and in doing so creates a focus on that which is irreducibly other, sustaining the interest of the subject and thereby encouraging it to dwell in this encounter' and that

beauty, then, can be said to concern moments that are wonder-full, moments within which a sense of fullness is felt. Here, a mutuality of subject and object obtains as well as an abundance of meaning within an ecstatic mode of attention. (quoted in Wilson, 177)

But her claim that music exposes us to what is other 'in an immediate way' is questionable, for our reception of it is mediated by our brain-body's mechanisms, some of which have been altered by acculturation, personal experience and reflection. Rather it involves a different kind of mediation from that involved in interpreting a statement, where questions of truth are relevant. (To be sure, the power of art to hold our attention and evoke emotions may contingently be mobilized to broadcast a truth claim about something, as in Picasso's *Guernica* or Abel Meeropol's song *Strange Fruit*.) Art may enable us to experience something novel, such as a different kind of feeling or a different way of seeing something; and this opening up of experience and practice can feel wonderful. But why should we worry whether our aesthetic experiences are in any sense 'true'? I remain convinced that it's scratching where it doesn't itch.

Naturalist suggestions

Although, in keeping with critical realism, Nick is mostly preoccupied with ontology, at various points (e.g.: 54, 55, 59, 74, 185) he refers to interesting attempts to provide substantive biological, neurological or psychological explanations of aesthetic experience, though generally without going into these in any depth. I suggest that it would be useful to explore these further by asking a realist question: what it is about us, the things we experience, and the relation between them, that enables us to experience some things as beautiful, ugly, etc.?

Alternatively, what is it about our four-planar being that affords aesthetic experience? The answer requires not just a philosophical, token naturalism, but one which takes our biology seriously.

Reviewing a large body of research, Iain McGilchrist argues that experiences differ according to whether the right brain or left brain is dominant (though both hemispheres are invariably involved to some degree). When the right is dominant, our experience is more receptive, contextual, relational, more aware of betweenness, and concrete (in the sense of many-sided), and has a gestalt character. When the left hemisphere is dominant there is a more focussed, abstract (in the sense of one-sided), and analytical attention (McGilchrist 2009). The right hemisphere also has a bigger role in registering and interpreting emotion. As he argues, the relative undervaluing of right brain-dominant cognition in western culture is itself an obstacle to understanding aesthetic experience. While there is an unthought element too it, this again involves the actualization of causal mechanisms. Thus, music produces physiological changes: it affects the brain-body's homeostatic processes, heart and respiration rates, galvanic skin responses, and temperature. We may notice some of these changes, and of course, they may trigger emotions, memories, thoughts, imaginations. As McGilchrist says, 'music does not symbolize emotional meaning, which would require it to be interpreted (though we can do this too); it metaphorizes it – "carries it over" direct to our unconscious minds' (2009, 96).

Underpinning axiology is the biological normativity of the homeostatic mechanisms of the body, such as the nervous system and the limbic system, which keep us safe in a diverse and ever-changing environment and direct us to seek out opportunities that allow us to flourish (Damasio 1999, 2018). As Mary Midgley said, 'You cannot have a plant or animal without certain quite definite things being good or bad for it' (Midgley 2003, 54). Damasio enlarges upon this:

We humans, along with the creatures from which we descend biologically, inhabit a universe in which objects, animate as well as inanimate, are not affectively neutral. On the contrary, as a consequence of its structure and action, any object is naturally favourable or unfavourable to the life of the individual experienter. Objects and events influence homeostasis positively or negatively and, as a result, yield positive or negative feelings. (Emphasis in original, Damasio 2018, 180)

Homeostatic mechanisms drive the *conatus* or *appetitus*, and the attraction-withdrawal tendencies we are born with, that Nick refers to, following Winnicott. Our brain not only maps or represents events and objects we encounter but also registers and 'values' them positively, negatively or neutrally, through 'somatic markers', whether we realize it or not (Damasio 2018). As Nick notes, this valuation has an evolutionary cause in terms of reward mechanisms for coming up with expectations that turn out right – and, I would add, for doing what enables us to flourish. Through care and socialization – including involvement in art practices – these responses are developed in various ways. Through the emergent powers of mind, we may reflect on and modify these representations and valuations through downward causation, though always within the constraints and affordances of our body-minds as they have developed so far and of the cultural resources on which we can draw.

Form, resonance and genres

I was surprised by the lack of discussion of form in aesthetic experience and especially in art, presumably because this is associated with actualism. But some aesthetically-pleasing forms are structures that give rise to their own causal powers, such as the ability of the fan-

faulted ceiling of a cathedral to bear weight. (Contrary to a common assumption of some accounts of critical realism, not all structures are unobservable.) It is not simply the causal powers of stone that allow this but rather those of stone cut in particular forms, and it is the shapes we find beautiful. Spacings and timings are not incidental to natural necessity but can give rise to emergent powers. Those of music are particularly regular and striking. In a footnote, Nick writes

We should be careful not to confuse apparent signs of beauty, e.g. symmetry or certain shapes and forms, with beauty per se (this is a form of actualism). It is tempting, for example, to account for the beauty of a sea-shell we pick up on a beach in terms of its particular shape and form, perhaps abstracting to the theory of the golden ratio to infer some mathematical grounding for such experience. Equally, beauty is often associated with the human form. (190, n.106)

But again, while explaining the production of things we find beautiful requires going beyond the actual, it is the result that we find beautiful, not the causes, so it is indeed reasonable to regard beauty in an actualist way.

Nick notes Santayana's claim that

The sense of beauty is the harmony between our nature and our experience. When our senses and imagination find what they crave, when the world so shapes itself or so moulds the mind that the correspondence between them is perfect, then perception is pleasure, and existence needs no apology. (quoted by NW, 174)

While Nick moves quickly on to other theorists' views, for me Santayana's point alludes to something that is surely central to aesthetic experience: the importance of resonances – literal (physical) rather than merely metaphorical – between the shapes, spacings, sequences, pitches and rhythms of what we experience and those of our body. Why else would different musical intervals affect us differently physically – making us feel comfort or discomfort and tension, sad or happy? Some chords seem to be rooted and in equilibrium, some float without anchor, some feel like they are going somewhere. A 'turnaround' at the end of a phrase in a jazz standard actually feels like turning round and going back to the beginning. What is it about these forms, our brain-bodies and the relation between them that produces these effects? While the bodily powers that enable them are innate, they are not necessarily fixed: neuroplasticity allows them to be altered by experience, including subconscious influences, albeit in morphogenetic fashion, that is, always within the changing constraints and enablements of our brain-bodies. And of course, our responses are mediated by a host of memories and associations, some conscious, some not but still effective.

In addition to form and resonance, I was expecting something on the importance of genres in art, as forms that provide highly productive sets of tools and constraints that enable distinctive kinds of sensibility and expression and allow innumerable developments and unfurlings. There is a link here to flourishing, understood in Aristotelian fashion not merely as the absence of suffering or want, but the activation and development of our capacities.

Conclusion

While this has been quite a critical review it is not intended to be a hostile one; the book is fresh and thought-provoking and I found myself telling friends about it. I admire its ambition in taking on an extraordinarily difficult subject, and I applaud its powerful statements on the importance of art in education, against the Gradgrind tendencies of recent government policies. Yet it is also inaccessible in parts; for example, I doubt if many readers not already familiar

with critical realism will get beyond chapter 2's 21 steps. And I wish it hadn't been driven by a desire to fit with so much of Bhaskar's later and, in my view, idealist philosophy. Although Nick is wary of the philosophy of meta-reality, at times I felt that engaging with it got in the way of theorizing aesthetic experience. In any case, having a sound ontology does not guarantee that the specific processes, relations and objects with which we choose to populate it are the right ones. Here, I wonder if we sometimes expect ontology to do too much work while ignoring the advances of science. I would suggest a naturalist – and more particularly a 'biopsychosocial' – approach, offers most promise for understanding aesthetics, and one which can fit with the more secure elements of critical realist ontology.

Andrew Sayer

3. A critical realist experience

The Space that Separates initiates what I hope will be a continuing, expansive development of critical realist theories of aesthetics, art, and particular arts. As a theatre historian and theorist who joined the critical realism email discussion list soon after it began in the mid-1990s, I have long experienced the near-absence of critical realist work on the arts (and for that matter, on history), and it is good to see more of that absence absented. Wilson's concepts of aesthetic experience as being-in-relation with the real and especially art as experience's shared form are intriguing. The important next steps are of course to refine, fill in, expand, and apply a critical realist theory of aesthetics, but here I'll content myself with ... footnotes.

Bear with me, this will sound a bit trivial before it reaches, technically, a trivium. One footnote reads:

Tobin Nellhaus has put forward a theory of the empirical domain as 'semiosis'. Semiosis refers to any form of activity, conduct or process that involves signs including the production of meaning. ... There is no doubt that the capacity to use language as a communicative tool is central to our social interaction and information exchange. ... However, we should not reduce the empirical to this capacity alone – not least because we are all intuitively aware of experiencing the world without this involving signs or any mediation of language. I would argue that semiosis is but a part (albeit an important one) of a larger whole. (65, n. 59)

In another note he asserts that my position 'leaves little or no conceptual space for much of what I am discussing' (208, n. 21).

Yep, I'm countering some criticism, buried in footnotes; apparently I'm that petty. Actually no, I'm baffled. Unfortunately Wilson seems unaware of the article in which I laid out my argument, which draws on Charles S. Peirce's semiotic theory (Nellhaus 1998), so my bafflement is three-fold: my actual argument supports his own; through the course of his book Wilson makes some of my counterarguments for me; and worryingly, his counterclaim – 'we are all intuitively aware of experiencing the world without this involving signs or any mediation of language' – reverts to empiricism. Epistemic relativity, after all, affirms the ineluctability of descriptions. He acknowledges the role of representation several times, yet this claim isn't precisely a slip either.

Wilson holds that aesthetic experience is being-in-relation with the world. To this Peirce would reply, 'Exactly! It's a sign!'

I imagine a few readers leaping up in horror: I've gone over to the Dark Side, conventionalism, the linguistic fallacy! But the shoe is stuck on the other foot. Start by ridding yourself of the notion that signs necessarily pertain to thought – even nonconscious thought. Expunge it. Drown it. Absent it. Semiosis is immeasurably vaster. And the issue is consequential for the

further development of not only critical realist aesthetics, but also critical realist philosophy and social theory.

Bhaskar's semiotic triangle in *Dialectic* is basically an (unacknowledged or perhaps unaware) version of Peirce's tripartite concept of the sign, which consists (in Bhaskar's approximate terminology) of a signifier, signified, and referent, and Bhaskar's discussion of semiosis, though scant, rough-hewn and slightly off the mark, captures some of the implications (Bhaskar 1993, 222–23). Peirce's own theory, however, is highly subtle, complex, systematic, and powerful. Here I can only sketch its dimensions. First, his signs exist in relationship (being-in-relation) with intransitive reality, unlike the signifier/signified pair postulated by Saussure (which goes back to Locke). These intransitive realities include previous signs; hence signs are also dynamic and processual (which is why I prefer 'semiosis domain' over 'semiotic domain'). I would argue that signs are generative mechanisms with sui generis causal powers. Second, Peirce's signs can be of any size and complexity, from a speck or a tone or a touch to a fully staged production of Wagner's four-opera Ring cycle and beyond. Third, they are ontologically differentiated, such that not just words but also smoke indicating fire and simple redness are signs – signs that are not social conventions. Consequently they are far from restricted to human minds; indeed, Peirce expressed a concern that 'our system may not represent every variety of non-human thought' (Peirce [1931–58] 1994, 4.551).¹ A bee, for example, responds to signs of pollen's wholesomeness, and dances to inform its fellow bees where to feed. Due to this insight about sign usage, Peirce is credited as the herald of today's science of biosemiotics – a field encompassing even cells. Obviously, no one claims that trees converse in anything like human language, but they do communicate (Grant 2018). We are constantly learning more about how living beings communicate and respond collectively to their environment. Nor are humans somehow unaffected by biosemiosis. Our pheromones are biosemiotic. Hunger is a sign. If we find ourselves immersed in thunderous drumming, and we respond in any manner beyond the physics of one's body being vibrated – our body catching the rhythm, our heart picking up tempo – that response too, as a response, is semiosis. Although it is extremely tempting to think our embodied responses to the world are not semiotic if they are not conceptual, that (empiricist) notion misconstrues both semiotics and concepts, and maintains mind/body dualism.

To place all this in critical realist terms, Peircean signs not only exist intransitively, they also operate transitively. Not only do they operate transitively, they're inherently differentiated. Not only are they differentiated, they're stratified and emergent. Not only are they stratified and emergent, they're stratified and emergent in three different ways. Maybe more.

Hence my puzzlement at Wilson's view that my position 'leaves little or no conceptual space' for his aesthetics. In dozens of places Wilson unknowingly echoes Peirce, and he could unify some scattered claims through Peirce. By corraling Peirce, there are several avenues in which a critical realist aesthetics can advance its sophistication and power. To point in just a few directions, Peirce indicates that in terms of what he calls iconic signs, Shakespeare's *King Lear* has a unique 'flavor' (Peirce [1931–58] 1994, 1.531), which shows that Peircean semiotics includes our qualitative and affective responses to art, a suggestion he supports elsewhere, aligning Wilson's 'being in relation' with semiosis. When one speaks of being in relation to the real, one should recognize that there are various kinds of such relationships, a diversity that Peirce's semiotics prioritizes. His semiotics also provides some tools for analyzing metaphor and metonymy. And then there's the trivium part. 'Trivium' is the medieval term for grammar, logic and rhetoric (argumentation and persuasion), which Peirce adopted in his own characteristic way (Peirce [1931–58] 1994, 1.191, 1.559, 8.342). When Wilson writes of art's rules and structures (195), he is on that territory: in his own field of music, for example, there are grammars of scales, intervals and chords; logics of tonality, atonality, serialism and

cacophony; and rhetorics of catching audiences' attention and carrying them along emotional and intellectual journeys through melody, tempo, key changes, instrumentation, and auditory attack. John Cage's 4'33" (four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence) constitutes an argument about music itself. Wilson also notes the existence of non-human cognition (58–59), which biosemiotics examines. The fact that other species also use signs might even modify the concept of aesthetics, particularly when one considers that many animals evidence a sense of beauty not reduceable to evolutionary advantage – they seem to have aesthetic tastes (Jabr 2019). Whatever the explanation for that, it places the human need for aesthetic experience in continuity with the rest of the natural world. Moreover, it offers the possibility that Wilson's case for aesthetics entailing an ethic of care can expand to care for the entire natural world.

I should say, despite my Peircean drumbeat, I seldom use semiotics in my own work, which largely concerns the history and theory of theatre as a sociohistorical practice, and the ontologies that subject requires – but those ontologies do need to encompass semiosis. Moreover, the extent to which Peirce's work is consonant with CR has yet to be fully examined, and I could easily list a half dozen caveats. And of course, Wilson addresses many issues Peirce isn't remotely useful for. But since the topic is aesthetics, I have little choice but discuss him. Also, it's worth mentioning that Peirce has already had notable impact on critical realism: his considerable work on logic produced the concept of retrodution (inference to the best explanation), which Bhaskar adopted as a major part of theorization (Bhaskar 1986, 68) along with his version of the Peircean sign; and Archer built her concept of the internal conversation on Peirce's thinking. In fact, since Peirce developed his own phenomenology, Wilson might wrest more from Peirce than I do. If he or others wants to consider the breadth of Peircean semiosis as enchantment, 'wherein being is understood to be intrinsically meaningful and valuable' (156), although it's not my sort of language, I don't have a counterargument either.

Turning now to Wilson's own analyses, I have some reservations which perhaps stem from the paucity of examples. Given space considerations I will discuss only one concern, but a highly relevant one. The examples of aesthetic experience Wilson does mention, such as viewing mountains, gazing at paintings, dancing, and listening to music, all involve what he considers 'unmediated' sense perceptions. But it is unclear to me how his theory applies to reading a novel or listening to a story. Our 'unmediated' experiences of those are limited to appreciating typography, vocal richness and so forth, which may indeed be lovely but surely aren't the point. Also, novelists don't usually write of their own experiences, but rather those of fictional characters who, being fictional, never actually experienced anything. Some fictional experiences might never actually be experienced, like time travel and being magically turned into a frog. What, then, are the experiences we experience in reading a novel that make it an aesthetic experience? Is it not one? If one replies that one experiences imagined experiences, what does it mean to imagine experiences that cannot be experienced – how can one even communicate them? Or does the aesthetic experience consist of the act of imagining per se (analogous to dancing), in which case wouldn't all imagining be aesthetic? What does the activity of imagining consist of? Are imagined entities real, and whatever one's answer, what are the implications for being in relation to the real and thus aesthetics? These questions extend to all language use. Wilson may be able to clarify what tools he's provided for addressing the aesthetics of literature, but clearly, I have doubts: it seems exceedingly difficult to answer these questions without integrating a theory of semiosis and/or meaning into aesthetics, whether it's signs, representation or something else. We're back to my original point.

However, Wilson is right to point out CR's underdeveloped epistemology, which I too have experienced. His analysis of experience is, I take it, intended as a step in that direction, and a

reason he allies aesthetics with knowledge. But the function of experience within epistemology is to provide evidence, and as soon as you say anything like 'X is evidence of Y', whether your evidence is sense perceptions, instrument data, medical symptoms, documents, facts, statistics or whatever, you're speaking of signs (usually indexical signs). Smoke is evidence (a sign) of fire. High blood pressure may be a sign of illness. Equating being with knowledge of being is a sign of a flawed ontology, etc.

It's time, then, to bring the argument home: the implications for critical realism itself. Refiguring this spot in CR is part of Wilson's own project, or so I surmise from his decision to name it Aesthetic Critical Realism rather than critical realist aesthetics, and his assessment that ACR occupies the space between epistemology and phenomenology (205). Wilson places his view of experience into context with Bhaskar's three domains, in which the empirical domain consists of experiences. Bhaskar introduced those domains in *A Realist Theory of Science*, where he scrutinized and reconceptualized experience's role in theories of science; but crucially, he did not then reconsider the definition of experience itself (even if he later made it a subset of 'the subjective'). As a result, it can still be understood in empiricist terms as, to use one encyclopedia of philosophy's phrase, 'direct, observational knowledge of the world' (Honderich 1995, 261). If experience is 'emergent' but not in the sense of constituting a distinctive and irreducible causal power – if the only thing unique about experience is that it consists of those events occurring in our brains – then the domains of the actual and the real become merely the addition of indirectly known parts of the world, both figuratively and literally symbolized by Bhaskar's formula $dr > da > de$. As Wilson observes, within critical realism 'experience has all too often been glossed over actualistically' (205); and by adopting the notion that experience comprises an entire ontological domain while leaving its meaning intact, Bhaskar sheltered that tendency. Wilson was snared by the trap himself, in his empiricist critique of semiosis quoted earlier, which is why it isn't exactly a slip. His better argument is that 'aesthetic experience is defined as our emergent experience of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world (the real)' (69) – a definition that is decidedly not empiricist, and by introducing it Wilson advanced over Bhaskar rather than grounded his concept in him.


Yet he does not go far enough, as his slip indicates. Two readings are possible. On the one hand, if we interpret his definition as phrased, it implies that non-aesthetic experience is somehow not in relation to the world; at a guess, non-aesthetic experience might be related to ideas rather than the world, but that comes at the cost of considering ideas unreal, which is a standard empiricist line. Or maybe the alternative to 'in-relation' is brute force, which leads us to mechanistic empiricism. But if I have an ordinary experience, such as overhearing a neighbour sneeze, surely that experience is in relation to the world, despite probably being non-aesthetic. If an experience arises through our interaction with our environment, then it is in relation to our environment. On the other hand, there is Wilson's preferable suggestion that aesthetics engages our emergent capacity to experience – that is, aesthetics is a second-order experience. In this case, Wilson's phrase 'experience of being-in-relation', which I first treated literally, means 'being in relation to our being-in-relation'. But if aesthetics is a second-order experience, then we face the problem of specifying what new power or property first-order experience possesses that is irreducible to what it emerged from. Simply observing the existence of underlying mechanisms (see 59–61) doesn't accomplish that: reductivist empiricism completely agrees and says the underlying mechanism of experience consists of neurons firing and nothing more (a danger raised by Wilson's fleeting and thus misinterpretable references to neurobiology). Hence identifying experience's emergent power, not merely its underlying mechanisms, is indispensable. Both readings reveal instability in Wilson's overall argument.

Due to the similar gaps in their analyses of experience, both Bhaskar and Wilson are at risk of being critical realists in the daytime and empiricists at night. One cannot affirm the epistemic role of description, i.e. representation, while denying the medium of representation. Matters get stickier still when one recalls Bhaskar's critiques of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, which Wilson seconds. And I as well. However, we have but little understanding of how other living beings experience the world – or whether the term 'experience' is even appropriate outside the human species, since for us experience is always coloured by the fact that we think. One can solve that awkwardness by defining experience for all creatures as direct, unmediated sense perception, but that resorts to empiricism again.

In short, as long as critical realism shackles an entire ontological domain to 'experience', it will surreptitiously harbour an actualist, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ontology.

Critical realism becomes self-contradictory when its theorists allow empiricism's 'experience' to define an ontological domain. So I urge you: complete the Copernican revolution in philosophy that critical realism stands for. Conceptualize experience differently, and with it, the 'empirical' domain. If you disagree with a Peircean approach to the problem, that's fine, find a better solution. But the problem itself is real: critical realism cannot logically or ethically sustain an entire ontological domain defined on empiricist terms. My solution is that all experience is being-in-relation; that experience's emergent property or power is meaning; and that the ontological domain consists of and should be defined as semiosis. Semiosis generates the emergence, stratification, processuality, and tremendous diversity of meaning at all cognitive and embodied levels – and it embraces all living beings, right down to cells. Even some non-living entities have semiotic activities (e.g. computers). What we call 'experience' is merely the minuscule region of the semiotic domain where humans are. Human experience is distinguished by our advanced development of socially-produced conventional signs, such as language, which are necessary for reflexivity: we are a special case. But the domain as a whole is far vaster – beyond language, beyond humans. Moreover, because Peircean signs are tripartite, they build and maintain bridges across *'the space that separates'* the intransitive and transitive dimensions, preventing them from becoming fused together, a fusion that produces the epistemic and ontic fallacies; hence conceptualizing the domain as semiotic opens a passage to a more robust critical realist epistemology.

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4. The dialectics of aesthetic elaboration

What would a 'critical realist aesthetics' look like? Of course, for critical realists that is a trick question, committed as we are to stratified explanation. The better question is, what are the core beliefs that writers sympathetic to critical realism can accept? It has perhaps not often been articulated, but researchers in the critical realist tradition are aware of constituting something like a political coalition. That does not mean that there are not healthy disagreements among authors. But each is aware of the power of understanding and maintaining the common levels of stratified ontological commitment for the sake of solidarity. Two critical realist authors never just disagree but orient their disagreement in terms of a structure of common commitments and disagreements.

I begin by mentioning meta-theoretical commitments because it is of the utmost importance for the political force of a critical realist aesthetics not to fray under individual contrarianism and careerism, lest the power of Roy Bhaskar's philosophical revolution be blunted. Given that premise, Nick Wilson's (2019) *The Space that Separates: A Realist Theory of Art* provides an

ideal rallying point to work from. Wilson has moved critical realist thinking into aesthetics in an admirable way, having created a roadmap of just such meta-theoretical commitment for further discussion. Wilson has not only done a remarkable job in summarizing a great number of tenets of theory proposed by Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier and many others, but also provided a robust core body of commitments with the dialectical and spiritual turns added as useful but not required further elements.

Wilson's result is aesthetic critical realism. His chief accomplishment is proposing a depth ontology of human experience and an aesthetic theory of being-in-relation to the real. Using Bhaskar's dialectical depth ontology, we move via aesthetic and artistic knowledge from Being as Such, to Being as Process, Being Together, and Being as Incorporating Transformative Practice (19). Each stratum reflects a theme: Experience and Aesthetic Experience, Axiological Experience, Metaxological Experience and Cultural Experience. There are more levels, but these map Bhaskar's basic dialectics. I think they are the core of the theory, though it is richer than that, and Wilson himself writes that, 'I believe that my primary task is to point towards what OCR and DCR have so far overlooked – as the basis of Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR)' (116).

The aesthetic knower and maker engage with the world (being as such), understand some relative feature of it (being as process), propose a new synthesis (being together), and act in the world (being as transformative practice). This set comprises the dialectical movement of the subject toward effective transformative praxis in society. In effect, we have the CR armature of a dynamics of the aesthetic within dialectical social theory to compete with influential accounts of Jürgen Habermas or Slavoj Žižek (Boucher 2010). That is not a mean feat.

To date, most left or post-Marxist theories (especially of a Jamesonian vein) depressingly outline the aesthetic – in Geoff Boucher's words – as an 'allegory of the political'. The issue of aesthetic autonomy is recognized but the ontological tools to accept it without mystification are absent. These prior theories are all based on either idealist or negative dialectics, so only the CR account outlined by Wilson is capable of productive accounts of social flourishing. This is sorely needed because heretofore we have precious developments of Bhaskarian dialectics but little idea of how these would intersect with influential aesthetic theories.²

As I am very positive about Wilson's contribution, I will note only two reservations that I carried away with me after studying *The Space that Separates*. One begins with the very title, which seems to enshrine defamiliarization rather than settled custom as the basis of aesthetics. There is a danger that 'betweenness' could be interpreted as a correlate of perpetual modernist displacement or else an index of capitalism's incessant reordering, that the project is in short, modernist. Indeed, if I think of a kind of 'normalcy' and not exceptionalism attributed to the arts, as in the worldview of Ananda Coomaraswamy that Bhaskar admired, we would precisely wish to achieve some qualitative aesthetic state of achieved knowledge (Coomaraswamy 1946).

Yet the 'space that separates' is merely a condition of being, a source of the eternal motor of dialectics, and therefore not objectionable in either a modernist or capitalist way. My further doubt arises with an alignment (Ch. 6) of Bhaskar's 3L (Totality) with William Desmond's (1995) 'metaxology', which seems to enshrine indeterminacy at the very centre of its metaphysics. (Later in Chapter 8 truth is likened to being metaxologically 'open'). There has not been much engagement with Desmond in the critical realist world and I will not remark substantively on him except to say that being-in-relation-with the real must involve not just 'astonishment' but asserted knowledge. Perhaps my question has to do with whether Wilson is describing the contact with the real or the intuited analogical fulness – if only in a glimpse – of the real.

It furthermore sometimes appears that this betweenness is restricted to the aesthetic sphere. Wilson counterposes ‘the tendency of science (and philosophy) to work towards a ‘triumphalist’ explanatory closure, with the necessary openness of art’ (140). At another moment, Wilson links subjective experience and art, juxtaposing the realist theory of art ‘which accounts for (aesthetic) experience, subjectivity and the relation between imagination and perception’ and the realist theory of science (192). Such thinking could lead to dichotomizing, in a Romantic way, the arts as a special kind of knowing relative to the civilizing processes of modernity.

We would not wish to conflate the moment of activation of an aesthetic experience from its categorical content. There is an inherent tendency within aesthetics and particularly humanism to value personal experience or response. Many literary critics took from Roman Ingarden’s (1973 [1931]) notion of the incompleteness of the aesthetic object and his idea that it was ‘concretized’ to be the foundation of ‘reader-response’ theory. Yet the cognition of the object was, for Ingarden, a matter of course, prescribed by ontological paths. An incomplete object was routinely concretized and there was no personal agency involved. In the spirit of Critical Realism’s emphasis on ontology, it is useful to remind ourselves that such experience is always ontologically content-bearing.

In light of a levelling between what has already been written within Critical Realism, in reading *The Space that Separates* I have challenged myself to think of how applicable many of Wilson’s ideas about the aesthetic might also be applied to science. Indeed, in the chapter on Truth (ch. 8, corresponding to Bhaskar’s 5A), Wilson affirms that truth need not be propositional and can be achieved in aesthetics. Further, given the undeniable success of the critical realist philosophy of science, as initiated by Bhaskar and brilliantly expanded by Christopher Norris, how can claims for science not be forgotten in an aesthetic theory?

Given that Wilson makes analogies between the sciences and aesthetics, I would like to see them pushed further. There is value in seeing being-in-relation to the real as also a value of science. Both are fallible forms of knowing oriented to the real. To press the continuous meaning of ‘critical realism’ – back from Wolfgang Köhler, to Max Planck and Ludwig Boltzmann – we could push the other direction to Köhler’s pupil, Rudolf Arnheim (1969, 697–698), for whom ‘science employs and consumes sensory data in order to arrive at the principles governing the operations of physical and mental forces. In art, the sensory data themselves are the ultimate statement’. Keeping art and science in strict parallelism (without essentializing the couplet) accrues to us all that we have been taught about the philosophy of science by critical realists (transitive/intransitive, fallibilism, tendencies and causal powers). Furthermore, the relation of models to cognition in science – an experiential apparatus aiding knowledge of the real – raises important questions about experience even in scientific practice.

Indeed, one of the questions I am left with is to what extent we may need to bring science to experiential life? How often are the findings of science merely instrumentalized and how often do we feel that tension, that openness, as we experience the disclosure of the real? How much does scientific inquiry itself contribute to the articulation of our sense of subjectivity? How much can we affirm that scientific activity is inherently social?

Reading throughout the book, I was constantly reminded of Arnheim – a Gestalt psychologist relying upon a phenomenally realist yet dualist epistemology, based on the metaphysical monism of forces (Verstegen 2005, 2014). Like Wilson, Arnheim (1988, 225) does not conflate art and aesthetics and even defines ‘art’ generically as ‘the ability of perceptual objects or actions, either natural or man-made, to represent, through their appearance, constellations of forces that reflect relevant aspects of the dynamics of human experience’. Furthermore, a notion of depth of meaning is built into Gestalt theory, where an experience or work of art might engage more general needs than another.

The centre of Arnheim's aesthetics is directed tensions, dynamics and force. There are forces in the world – critical realists would call them powers – but experience is also composed of (phenomenally real) forces. These are both aesthetically and ethically charged, filled with 'demands'. Wilson's 'energy', like 'force', has both physical and psychological manifestations. Therefore, Wilson's call for such a concept is highly warranted.

Not seeing a natural ally like Arnheim cited is understandable (and we all have our personal favourite writers) but this leads me to my final point, about a tension in regard to eclecticism in *The Space that Separates*. As I noted, my interests in this landmark book cannot be separated from its pragmatic function in orienting research and therefore questions of demarcation are front and centre for me. Much work in Critical Realism is about laying bare theoretical allies in different fields and connecting unfamiliar bedfellows in distinct disciplines with critical realist theory.

Part of Wilson's task is laying out a Critical Realist argument; the other is introducing discrete subjects and recounting its major players and theories, and then commenting upon them. In the latter context, there is the duty to cover the basics of a subject, and one must round up heroes and villains. But in a couple of cases I felt the tolerance was a bit too high. For example, there is no denying that Mikel Dufrenne (1973) was an influential aesthetician in the phenomenological tradition, but I do not see much use of his works in general or as presented by Wilson, especially in light of his excessive idealism. I feel something similar about John Dewey (1934), often hopefully mentioned in art circles, but ultimately disappointing because his pragmatist epistemology cannot be bracketed from his account of aesthetic experience.³ In both cases, the theorist has to be understood 'in the round'.

Another issue arises when allied thinkers seem to be discussed in too much detail. One example is the use of Roy Wood Sellars to expand the idea of experience in Chapter 3. Although the difference between early twentieth century and Bhaskar's critical realism are often emphasized, Wilson treats the real similarities, underwritten partly by Bhaskar himself. As I have argued, there is an important metaphorical expansion of the epistemic act of critical (non-naïve) position to reality (in American critical realism), with the socialized act of transformative practice relative to reality (in Bhaskarian critical realism) (Verstegen 2010).

Between Roy and Wilfred Sellars there is some distance, and further distance from my personal favourite, Maurice Mandelbaum. If Roy Wood Sellars held to what could be called 'critical direct realism' but Mandelbaum supported 'radical critical realism', there are potential advantages to a Critical Realist project in either.⁴ Roy Wood Sellars argued that 'actually existing material objects are presented to us through their appearances'. Mandelbaum instead argued that we cannot identify actually existing material objects with our phenomenal experiences. Sellars helps us with a theory in which the reality of the world informs our actions, but Mandelbaum instead stresses its fallibility. Personally, I like Mandelbaum's version but that is not so much the point. Varieties of American critical realism – around the figures of the two Sellars, Mandelbaum, and others – are more useful for their generic approach to perception, as Bhaskarian critical realism points us away from pure empiricist phenomenalism or naïve realism. Keeping the tent large enough for minor discrepancies seems important.

If I wished Wilson had signposted some of his theories a bit more in terms of levels of meta-theoretic commitment, it is only because I see his book becoming a point of reference and selfishly wish to give to the current of critical realism what I deny his personal working through of philosophical problems. Perhaps what would be of great use would be a case study by Wilson of a concrete artistic movement or intervention, wherein he could trace the working of aesthetic perception, mastery and action by the participating actors. It would be rewarding to see how being-in-relation to the real historically played out, with possible

false starts, apparent closures, and then some genuine cases of revelation and achieved transformational appreciation of our common world.

Ian Verstegen

5. Love and authenticity through aesthetic experience

Nick Wilson's *The Space That Separates* is a bold attempt to take critical realism into mainly uncharted territory, establishing a position which he calls Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR). At first sight, this may look like a niche add on to the regular concerns of critical realists. Surely, we can worry about the aesthetics once we have worked through the various social and environmental ills which beset the planet? This might also be a 'natural' attitude for many of us since we are all aware that humans have aesthetic experience, but this seems much like the icing on the cake: what we enjoy on a cultural evening out or when watching the sunset after a hard day's work. Wilson is at pains to point out that this may be the way it seems, and various theorists in the aesthetic tradition, especially Kant, have encouraged us to think this way, but they have not been critical realists. From his point of view what we learn from aesthetic experience can guide how we should live more generally and is key to understanding what it means to be emancipated. If we could bring more aesthetic experience to our daily lives, we would live more fully and we would understand more what it means to have the powers of a human being. We would see emancipation more clearly, and with that, how modern conditions close us down. This is not simply an appeal that we should become 'more arty'. It is the development of an understanding of what we syphon off into 'the arts box' from a daily life that is diminished in the process.

In the terms of critical realism, Wilson's book is remarkable for its ability to take critical realism by the scruff of the neck, and to show how its different forms need to be brought together to understand a crucial human phenomenon. Wilson is at home with developments in original critical realism (OCR), dialectical critical realism (DCR) and metaReality, and his immanent argument is that we must build on the original theories, which he finds overly rationalistic in their model of human behaviour, to constitute a basis from which the dialectical understanding of absence and constellationality can flow, and then to link these to ideas of identity and worldly enchantment. ACR is a development out of all three of these approaches, and it would be wrong to see it as only based around OCR or DCR, but nor, it appears, is it a development out of metaReality per se. Indeed, Wilson distinguishes his position from metaReality, which he sees as having 'leapfrogged' important issues concerning experience which lie at the heart of ACR. Wilson wants to spend time with OCR's emphasis on experience, and with its emphasis on structure, agency and morphogenesis, but he does so in order to show how these original themes need more in order to be complete, a completeness illustrated in the understanding of ACR.

Broadening experience

Wilson's starting point is the analysis of experience, which is given rather short shrift in original critical realism. Analysed as one element of the real in science, but as a conduit for actual events which must then be theorized and explained according to structures and mechanisms, experience is a starting point for scientific process, but not more. Yet experience is something with its own ontological depth which can be analysed in its own right, both in terms of its biological, physiological and psychological roots and in terms of its active engagement with the world where it operates as a basic human desire or energy (69). As 'the human capacity for

cognitive conscious and nonconscious, i.e. thought and unthought, knowledge gained through interaction with our environment' (61), it is a real emergent phenomenon. In this, it stands at the base of our axiological, i.e. our normative, experience of the world. Here, Wilson links it to theories of approach and avoidance motivation which explain how positive and negative experience lies at the heart of the formulation of value, and of how human beings ought to behave. From this starting point, Wilson fastens his argument to the work of Andrew Sayer and Andrew Collier to explain how values become sedimented in practices (Sayer), and how these are located in an understanding of being as good (Collier). The values of being are several and Wilson draws on Abraham Maslow's work to list a range of these, including truth, goodness and beauty, but also wholeness, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, and a range of other 'being values' (103). So we have a route from the ontology of experience through approach/ avoidance motivation to values in their social and ethical settings, and then to the specification of values, which include aesthetic values. Aesthetic experience is taken to be a form of axiological experience that touches on aesthetic matters. It is experience which discriminates and distinguishes between values, producing experiences which are highly valuable for human beings in the contexts of art, religion and other 'peak experiences'.

Metaxological experience

That is a foundation to which I will return, in particular to question the reliance on the theory of approach and avoidance motivation. However, moving on, we get into the actual nature of aesthetic experience, and here Wilson draws on the work of William Desmond and his account of the 'in betweenness' of human life. Desmond describes this as 'metaxological experience' and he develops a post-Hegelian and religious account of how human experience lies between the known and the unknown. To quote Desmond, 'We are on the way, to where we do not exactly know, from where we are unsure' (113), and he establishes the human condition as engaging with two kinds of love: an erotic perplexity which is the desire to know and to grow, and an agapeic astonishment, which might be both the starting point for the erotic drive to know, and the outcome of eventually knowing that there are things we cannot really know, but ought to love and celebrate for the wonder and complexity in which we are thrown. This sense of in-betweenness and mystery lies at the root of the axiological experience of being, but it comes especially to the fore in our aesthetic experience, where wonder, beauty, a sense of the sublime, of the achingly intangible come to us. Here, of course, we are in the realm of art, but we are also in the realm of play, of experience for the joy of experience, and with that, the possibility of creatively changing ourselves.

Here, too, we are in the realm of a broadened account of experience itself which is no longer just a conduit to (scientific) knowledge. Rather the possibility of aesthetic knowledge broadens knowledge beyond the strictly cognitive: such knowledge is metacognized in a way that includes 'emotions, feelings, intuitions and the cognitive nonconscious' (152). Here, Wilson introduces the work of Donald Winnicott and object relations metapsychology to indicate the connection between our inner life as growing, changing, metaxological, creatures and our engagement with the world – one in which we are already in a situation of being-in-relation. Here, it will be noted, there are links to DCR as well as the relational theory of being developed from OCR, but there is also something new hovering into view: psychoanalysis as a way of understanding human psychological interiority, and this plays a big part in Wilson's ongoing journey to ACR.

Expanding ‘the zone’

Before we proceed further, though, I want to pick up what I think is the most important message of Wilson’s argument, and it comes from thinking about the pure interiority of game-playing or artistic activity. This is the idea of being ‘in the flow’ or ‘the zone’, a period of maximum subject-object engagement which absorbs the subject completely, frees her, in an intense psychological state which can produce excellence beyond convention. This total absorption of the subject in the object producing the unanticipated is an experience of ‘metaxological excess’ (120). It is real, but, says Wilson, we need to be careful in how we frame it as somehow exceptional, only for elite people who reach a peak, but not for others:

I would like to suggest that society’s conception of ‘being in the zone’ as transcendent amounts to a TINA formation – a truth in practice combined with a falsity in theory. [A]n unfolding implication of this book’s argument for art and living artfully is that we can (and should) choose to pursue an alternative metaxological perspective (transcendence – with immanence), where being in the zone is considered to be a universal and realizable capacity of all human beings. (120)

Metaxological experience as the valuable practice of living in engaged transcendence with being-in-the-world is for all human beings. It is this experience that should inform our daily lives, our critiques of practices, institutions and structures, and act as a test bed for identifying what we should defend and what we should change. It is emancipatory, and if aesthetic experience feels like an additional offshoot of axiological experience, we have got it wrong. Aesthetic experience may be seen as axiological experience taken to its deepest and richest point.

If this seems a step too far from modern realities to be relevant, we might think what that says about modern realities. But more than this, the strength of Wilson’s argument is that it roots the most personal and concrete of experiences in a social setting. Aesthetic and axiological experience are real possibilities for human beings but their achievement is always emergent from the social. From Bhaskar’s original TMSA work, Archer’s morphogenesis and internal conversations, Elder-Vass’s ‘norm circles’, and Sayer’s social values, we are drawn forward to the human experience of betweenness and the possibility of transcendence. If Wilson’s argument presses further into the nature of aesthetic knowledge, it should never be forgotten that the grounds for such knowledge are always provided by social settings and these are in turn the things that axiological/aesthetic experience works through and on. The argument is synthetic and operates at different levels, signalled, in part, by the drive through the critical realist gears from OCR to DCR and metaReality. We see the social concretely in the way that Wilson critically contrasts the breadth of living artfully with the narrowness of actually existing arts practices. The work leads to a social, emancipatory, critique of ‘the arts’, but it does so on the basis of a critique of aesthetics which explains just what is wrong not just with the arts but by implication with other existing social practices.

Seeking truth and authenticity

In thinking through the relationship between the social and the aesthetic, I would like to consider how Wilson explores the aesthetic in terms first of truth and then of beauty. With regard to truth, Wilson draws upon the Bhaskar of DCR and metaReality to speak of alethic truth, a truth he (Wilson) links to Heidegger (though marking a distance to his metaphysics), through the idea of ‘dis-closure’. Alethic truth opens things up for us, ‘uncloses’ them, and here Wilson both draws on and maintains a distance to metaReality. Bhaskar, it is said, has ‘leapfrogged’ important questions in epistemology around experience by proceeding to theses about ultimate identity and (non-religious) spirituality. But Wilson also notes what is

valuable in this phase of Bhaskar's thought: the critique of alienated or 'demi-real' being in modernity, the need to re-enchant the world, the human potential for creativity, and spirituality as the fundamental need to find meaning in life. These are all key elements to be found in metaReality, which are also key aspects of Wilson's account of aesthetic/metaxological experience. It seems to me that what Wilson's hesitation before metaReality indicates is less a reluctance to endorse it and more the concern that in overleaping the issues he is concerned with, metaReality as the culmination of OCR and DCR might sell the overall system short. To understand aesthetic experience, you need to go back through all the stages of critical realism, and if you do this, you will also protect the theory against those instant reactions that suggested metaReality was both completely wrong-headed and undermined OCR and DCR. If this is right, I agree with Wilson.

Taking this integrated view, aesthetic experience is both grounded in social settings and made possible by human species being and psychology. From these Wilson wishes to construct an account of truth that links its alethic quality (the truth in things that is disclosed) to a sense of acting authentically. This is a fascinating project which Wilson links to artistic (aesthetic) performance, but also sees as something that is key to human axiology more generally ('a central challenge for all of us in our daily lives' – 165). But authenticity is a difficult concept, and one with a significant and not necessarily supportable philosophical heritage (Heidegger, Sartre, Adorno ...). In an inauthentic world, it might be said that we both mistrust and crave authenticity, but either experience plus the initial premise suggest, unless we take a severely poststructuralist outlook, there is something truly lacking we should like to find. I am not sure, but I think for Wilson, performing art authentically is about fathoming the depths of an object, accepting its conditionalities, taking it at its best, linking its best to what performance brings out, and finding the ways in which performance can through engaged subject-object engagement reach out to what lies beyond. The performer begins in Desmond's terms with erotic perplexity and ends with agapeic wonder. To replicate an artwork in a purely objective way would be impossible, but it would also miss the point. Just so, in our practical and phronetic involvement with the axiological world more broadly, we should attend to events and structures in a way that enquires about their limits and seeks to go beyond them, and in so doing opens us to finding things out that we did not yet know. That this is so much not what happens under actually existing social conditions says more about them than about our under-exercised human capacities to do better.

The sceptical voice will ask, but how can we know an act is authentic? To which the critical realist sidestep would be to say 'you are asking an epistemic question of an ontological state of affairs'. Yet the question still rings true in the sense that no one who thought they were acting authentically would wish to find out eventually that they had been fooled or had fooled themselves into a false, alienated, sense of authenticity. As Wilson also notes, the sense of authenticity has to be seen as plural, but this also raises questions about what it is. The notion of authenticity must be linked to an account of being which is both open and plural and yet substantive. Maslow's 'being values' help here especially when set alongside Bhaskar's metaReal account of love, connectivity, enchantment and spirituality (as aided, here, by Desmond's account of the metaxological). These give us grounds to distinguish and discriminate lower and higher values (p.103), or do they?

Pursuing beauty

One such value is beauty which Wilson discusses, drawing on DCR, as 'constellational experience'. Constellational identity means that the experience of beauty is linked to self being in relation to what lies beyond it. It is an experience of identity-in-difference or unity-in-diversity.

It is living outside the comfort of the self in a space between self and other, where objects are newly experienced in a heightened way through feelings of wholeness, pleasure, a sense of ease, and a merging with the object. Beauty of course is aligned here with what has been said about truth and metaxology, but it is also related to early formative experiences in human life. Here, Wilson picks up again themes in object relations metapsychology from psychoanalysts like Winnicott and Bollas, where the aesthetic and metaxological space that separates is a transitional, but also a transformative, psychological space. Appreciating beauty in a great variety of things brings out our ability to create and transcend, but it does so also because it takes us back to the psychological well-springs of creativity in our early experiences of being human. *The Space that Separates* links back to our earliest experience of life in that immensely creative development that is our infantile becoming in relation to others. Our first aesthetic experience is in our relations with a mother or other primary care-giver where the separating space is not yet formed. The intense surge of the desire to be in the experience of demanding food, and the pleasures of being satisfied and cared for, fashioning desire as love, is the archaic feeling at the heart of the feeling of beauty. The warm glow we feel when viewing a sunset or a well-performed work of art is at its deepest level a reacquaintance with our earliest experiences.

Here I am completely with Wilson, but I have a question. Though ‘constellational’, Wilson prioritizes the experience of the subject rather than the nature of the object in analysing beauty:

Our individual experience of beauty ... is always just that – ours; it will be different to someone else’s, and is contingent, to some extent at least, upon our cultural context ... [B]eauty is not an attribute or value pertaining to any object or event, but rather an experience of constellational identity, and as such, whilst we might expect our experiences of beauty to vary across different contexts, they are all accountable from this single perspective. (185)

If we link subjective experience constellationally to the object, it is easy to see what that tells us about the subject, but what of the object itself? Are some objects more beautiful than others, and why? Wilson does not wish to go down the route of a potentially elite ranking of beautiful objects in the manner of a Plato or a Kant. Better to affirm the potential for feelings of beauty across a range of objects, and therefore a range of people experiencing it. Wilson describes beauty as ‘the intensely-experienced energization of behaviour by, or the direction of behaviour ‘toward’ *The Space That Separates* (constellational identity), i.e. as a positive stimulus (a form of approach motivation) (184). Note the return here to the approach/avoidance theory with which Wilson began his account.

Perhaps I have two concerns here. The first is that this emphasis on subjective experience to the detriment of the object could be too inclusive. There is an old Scottish joke about beauty where the punchline is ‘It’s all a matter of taste, as the old lady said when she kissed the coo’. If said old lady approaches the metaxological space by affectionate relations with a cow, who are we to stop her? This may be a perfectly valid attachment to a member of another species, but are we, is she, approaching beauty in doing so? I can see an argument for saying she is, but equally I am drawn back to Wilson’s earlier argument that aesthetic experience is linked with our ability ‘to distinguish and discriminate between values’ and how we are motivated and energized ‘to decide courses of action that we might take based on what we consider to be most valuable’ (103), according to our ultimate concerns. How does his constellational approach permit him to discriminate?

My second concern relates to an earlier part of Wilson’s argument but comes out here in discussion of ‘approach motivation’. The ideas of stimulus and response towards and away from things gives Wilson an early foundation for ontology which he links back to the

Greeks (Democritus), to Bentham, to Freud and to Skinner. Some of these are strange bedfellows, and not just through a critical realist lens. They produce what might be seen as a 'lowest common denominator' approach to human motivation. Freud, it is true, did write of the 'pleasure principle', but he meant by this not the desire for positive stimulus but the desire to be free of all stimuli in the experience of a 'Nirvana'. While he was writing in these mechanical terms, another way forward was suggesting itself to him through the development of a structural account of human being as based on libido, love or Eros, a life drive leading to love of self and other through ego formation and, what would become in the work of Klein and others, the development of object relations theory. Though not in the Kleinian tradition, Hans Loewald's work also stands out here. From this point of view, approach and avoidance would be governed by the forming of mind and the resulting complex relations between self and other. This is the model of course that Wilson draws upon in thinking through the contribution of psychoanalysts like Winnicott and Bollas to '*the space that separates*'.

In relation to beauty, my concern is that the question whether a subjective approach to beauty perhaps oversimplifies the experience of beauty is perhaps enhanced by seeing the root human motivation in terms of a simple approach or avoidance theory. I wonder if a fuller account of beauty might involve thinking through not only how humans feel and experience things subjectively in relation to the constellational, but also how their feelings and experiences are affected by their 'objective' psychological needs as loving creatures. Should beauty not be as much dis-closed alethically by our necessary relations with the world as felt as a happy reiteration of our first experiences of love and care? It should be both; and putting both together would be what allowed us to build a picture of what we could substantively distinguish as beautiful – of high value – in an object.

Alan Norrie

6. Bridging the space that separates

Introduction

The Space that Separates draws attention to the betweenness of our existence. 'To be alive is to be-tween. Life, for human beings, is everything between conception and death. We are, all of us, between being and becoming, self and other, potential and actual, known and unknown' (ix). This is my starting point for seeking to understand human experience. In developing 'a realist theory of art' (not 'the realist theory of art' – there is so much more to say) I define art in terms of 'caring about experience' (196–198). Along with most recent care theorists I endorse a practiced-based rather than virtue-based definition of care (see Engster 2007, 21–22). In other words, in caring about experience we don't just pay attention to it, we also take responsibility for communicating our experience, and in responding to both our own and others' experiences come (closer) to recognize what we have reason to value. The 'bold' and 'ambitious' claim of my realist theory of art is just this – in all instances of art, not just those where the designation 'art' is conferred by representatives of 'the arts' or the 'art-world', art is caring about experience.

Not surprisingly, *The Space that Separates* divides opinion. Amongst the dividing lines evident from reading the reviews in this symposium issue, perhaps the most central concern my advancing a theory of art that appears not to discuss artworks, artists or the (politics of the) arts in any detail. For one reviewer, my approach seems 'extraordinarily broad and bemusingly narrow'. To the extent that many of the points raised by my reviewers point to what I didn't do, as much as what I did, I will begin by recapping as succinctly as I can what A Realist Theory of Art theorizes before saying something very briefly about what it doesn't

theorize – and why. My purpose is partly to clarify; but it is also aimed at responding to specific issues raised by reviewers in the hope of opening up possibilities of bridging *the space that separates*. These are discussed more fully in the final section of my response where I address the question – why does this realist theory of art matter?

Two years on from the publication of *The Space that Separates*, I am immensely grateful for this opportunity of a symposium hosted by the Journal of Critical Realism, and to my five reviewers. Their thorough and critical engagement has prompted me to take stock and helped me to make many connections that I didn't see before. As Tobin Nellhaus rightly observes, the 'next steps are of course to refine, fill in, expand, and apply' this theory, and I am glad of this opportunity to share some of my thinking in this respect here.

A realist theory of art – what it is theorizing

Through its pursuit of ontology, the philosophy of critical realism 'attempt[s] to understand and say something about "the things themselves" and not simply about our beliefs, experiences, or our current knowledge and understanding of those things'.⁵ It does this through 'underlabouring', or in the words of John Locke 'removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge' (Locke [1690] 1975). As Bhaskar puts it, 'philosophical underlabouring is most characteristically what critical realist philosophy does' (Bhaskar 2016, 1 my emphasis). *The Space that Separates* is first and foremost an attempt at underlabouring for art.

And so to that dividing line: I deliberately chose not to look in any detail at art-works – the things that generally get referred to as 'art', or the arts – where doing art 'counts' as art. This is not because these things aren't important – they are; but because my interest and particular perspective in writing this theory of art seeks to explain the things people do when doing art, and by extension, the things people are – human beings. I am interested in all instances of these doings and beings, not only those that get designated as art by the artworld. As such, it has been suggested to me that I might prefer to frame my theory in terms of 'living artfully' or 'art-based living'. As a pragmatic strategy that takes account of the powerful path dependency of how we apply terms in this area this certainly has its merits. But I stick to 'art' because, first, I think this is the ontological object of study and what I am underlabouring; and second, because I am concerned that such labels might all too easily be misconstrued as preaching some kind of message 'on behalf of' the arts. This would be wholly at odds with what this theoretical intervention seeks to achieve.

My starting point is experience. I define experience as 'the human capacity for cognitive conscious and nonconscious, i.e. thought and unthought, knowledge gained through interaction with our environment' (61). Keywords here are 'thought and unthought knowledge' and 'interaction'. In referring to a 'human capacity' I address the point that experience isn't something that defines being human but is a capacity of healthy functioning human beings. This is not contentious (though one reviewer appears to disagree). There is much about experience that is contentious, of course – be that the 'problem of perception', which I discuss in Chapter 3, or my dialectical and constellational critical realist account of experience, which through its articulation of 'both and' rather than 'either or' confounds easy reading. I will return to this later.

From experience we move to aesthetic experience. Considerable caution is needed here, not least because the term 'aesthetic' comes down to us with so much baggage attached. On the one hand, and as can be picked up from reviewers' comments, it continues to be unhelpful as a category precisely because it implies a specific and discrete form of experience (not 'normal' experience) that in turn promotes very limited and hackneyed discussion of cases

and types of such experience (boring concerts or fluffy rabbits being stereotypical examples). On the other hand, it directs us to the need to care more about experience (N.B. just as the current 'care crisis'⁶ brings our attention to the invisibility of much social, health and domestic care-work, so I argue that we should do more to visibilize caring about experience as a vital form of care-work in society). This is why each chapter progressively unfolds a deeper, richer account of what (aesthetic, axiological, metaxological, cultural, alethic, or constellational) experience is.

I define aesthetic experience as 'a dispositional and emergent form of experiencing in which we gain thought and unthought knowledge of being-in-relation with the natural necessity of the world (the real)' (62). More simply, aesthetic experience describes our paying attention to our experience (the first stage of caring about experience). Three clarifications are needed here. First, Dave Elder-Vass takes issue that I conceptualize experience as capacity (see above), entity and event. I wrestled long and hard about these apparently 'incoherent' ideas when writing my book, with (ironically) Dave's account of emergence being my touch-stone. Justification for the approach I take is premised on additional careful reading of the writings of John Dewey ('art as experience'), Daniel Stern ('schemas-of-being-with'), and most centrally, Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) and its signature concept of constellationality (see 59–60). Second, I don't argue that aesthetic experience is being-in-relation – I argue it is an emergent experience of being-in-relation, i.e. paying attention to experience. This involves a second (third, fourth etc.) order meta-level phenomenon of experience (see definition above) that is experienced by different people differently. I refer to this as a form of metacognition (101, 108 fn71). This is why we can't point to any one example as being 'aesthetic'. Third, my reference to 'the real' all too easily conjures up a sense of some transcendent, mystical, essential or spiritual realm that is 'beyond'. This is not the case (though it doesn't omit these things either). Referring to Roy Bhaskar's original Table of the three domains of reality (60) I argue that 'the real' embraces all that is (and isn't). The point here, in fact, is to draw attention to our universal and everyday capacity for experiencing the betweenness, or perhaps we should say, the valency⁷ of the world, as opposed to only that which is present through direct empirical perception. Such experience connects us with temporal, relational and epistemological betweenness – between being and becoming (possibility); between self and other (and 'the third'); between knowing and not-knowing.⁸ *The space that separates.*

I theorize art as the practice of giving sharable form to, i.e. communicating, our aesthetic experience. This is a practice of caring – caring about experience. For Elder-Vass 'the literal implication here is that [my] definition of art makes it apply to an extraordinarily wide range of human activity, including for example science and engineering'. Referring to the written documents or technological artefacts produced in science and engineering, Dave states 'I don't for a moment believe that Wilson thinks that these things are artworks'. This is a very useful example to illustrate precisely what I am arguing. 'Yes', art – as a practice of giving sharable form to our emergent experiences of being-in-relation to the natural necessity of the world – does apply to an extraordinarily wide range of human activity (to define art as what artists do, or what those in authority in the arts say is art, is both reductively limiting and in some respects, unrealistic); and 'no', I don't argue that such artefacts are artworks (though, under certain, albeit unusual, circumstances, they could be). Art and artworks are not the same things. [Warning: dividing line.] Art, as I define it, does not require the production of 'artworks' – though it does require attending to and communicating experience. Whether or not sharable forms (what I refer to elsewhere in the book as aesthetically real objects) get recognized and valued as 'artworks' is dependent both on their being made to be experienced⁹ rather than for some other purpose – which is the case in science and engineering, and contingent on the prevailing systems of value recognition, i.e. culture(s) – including 'the arts'. The

fact that what I define as art doesn't 'count' as art is precisely the reason why this theory is needed. It underlabours for other realist theories of artworks, artforms, and the arts (which I would very much welcome), but it does not seek to substitute for those theories (to the disappointment of some of my reviewers).

This brings us to culture. Culture is something that critical realists have had much to say about. Most notably, Margaret Archer theorizes the Cultural System in terms of 'the corpus of existing intelligibilia – by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone' (Archer [1988] 1996, 104.). My own approach – which is crucial to my overall approach and outlined in a dedicated chapter, argues for an alternative account of culture – one that instead of being founded on ideas is all about value (see Chapter 5, which introduces a dispositional realist theory of value that accounts for the relational nature of our processes of valuing). I define culture as 'our system(s) of value recognition' (143). Culture is comprised of multiple overlapping systems operating with different logics and at different scales. These include what we refer to as the arts, the education system, the market, and, of course, the political institutions and structures that are so pivotal in the distribution of resources and status. Under my ACR definition, culture does not denote shared 'cultural values', but rather shared systems of value recognition. Crucially, whether or not people consider the sharing of aesthetic experience through their artful projects to be valuable is contingent upon their prevailing culture(s). As such, the tools of art (including but not limited to 'artworks') both enable us to recognize what we have reason to value and are themselves valued in collective 'cultural' processes of value recognition, with the arts and the market being the most obvious 'systems' involved in this context. 'Good' art, therefore, results from individually experienced but collectively achieved processes of valuing. On the one hand, this theoretical approach elaborates on how 'sedimented valuations ... become attitudes or dispositions, which we come to regard as justified' (Sayer 2011); on the other hand, it explains why people continue to value things differently within otherwise shared cultures.

The Space that Separates also provides innovative realist theories of truth and beauty

Andrew Sayer asks, 'why should we worry whether our aesthetic experiences are in any sense "true"?' For me, this points in the direction of my focus on natural necessity, which I understand in terms of alethic truth not propositional truth. Why we should worry is because whether we live in line with our natural necessity and the natural necessity of the world (features that I hope are foremost in the minds of those attending COP26, which is going on this week) is surely the most pressing of all 'concerns' (i.e. the 'importance of what we care about', Frankfurt 1988).

In terms of beauty, reading reviewers' remarks I perceive a good deal of confusion here. Dave suggests that my focus is on a 'bemusing substitution of love and care for beauty and taste in the definition of the aesthetic'; but this is just not the case. I don't do this. He also bemoans my lack of focus on 'the principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty', despite a whole chapter dedicated to beauty and discussion of Kantian judgment and disinterestedness across several chapters. For Alan Norrie, giving the arresting example of the old woman and the coo, my explanation of beauty is seen in terms of the experience of the subject rather than the nature of the object (185). This is a misunderstanding of what I argue. I situate beauty in constellational terms as being characteristically 'between'. I posit that since the world exists independently of our observations of it, there is the possibility to experience the world and experience our experience of the world – and for these to be in

relation. It is when this relational encounter is energizing and we feel an intense sense of connection that I suggest we experience beauty. This is not to prefer the subjective over the objective, but rather to explain beauty in terms of the constellational relation between them both – *the space that separates*.

A realist theory of art – what it is not theorizing

I have alluded already to various aspects of what I do not theorize in a realist theory of art. However, for additional clarity – prior to moving on to consider why a realist theory of art matters – I will briefly re-visit some of these areas of deliberate omission here.

Tobin, Andrew and Ian all refer to my ‘aesthetics’, but (and this is not just playing word-games), I don’t claim to provide a realist aesthetics. Rather like my concerns over the term ‘aesthetic’, I suggest that ‘aesthetics’ carries with it a raft of assumptions, most notably about what is or isn’t included, indeed, what is the object of study (with artworks being the unspoken default). I think this lies at the heart of some (though not all) of Nellhaus’s concerns with my work. In fact, I agree with Tobin that it is ‘exceedingly difficult’ to address the aesthetics of literature (as an example), ‘without integrating a theory of semiosis and/or meaning ... whether it’s signs, representation or something else’. But I wasn’t doing this.

Following on from the above, I don’t provide a realist theory of art forms or artworks. I don’t discuss music, literature, film, sculpture, dance or any other specific genre of art, nor any specific works of art. This, as I hope will be clear by now, is because it is not my theoretical focus; but additionally, to do so, would require expert knowledge and at least a book length project in each case (please refer to my discussion of art’s ‘diversity’ and ‘relativism’ in the opening chapter (10–11)). Inevitably this decision leaves some disappointment and some notable conceptual gaps, including a failure to pick up more directly with some of the really excellent realist work carried out, amongst others, by Tobin and Ian in semiosis, theatre and performance, and art history. Tobin is justified in feeling some ‘puzzlement’ in response to a poorly phrased footnote that quite unwittingly gave the impression of dismissing the potential of semiotics to shed light on our understanding of artworks, and, indeed, the empirical domain. In fact, my clumsy footnote was trying to both call attention to Tobin’s work as significant, whilst excusing myself for not engaging with it more directly. As I’ll move on to shortly, this is precisely where bridge-building is both needed and very welcome.

I also hope that by now it will be apparent why I don’t provide a realist theory of (the politics of) the arts. This is not at all because I ‘neglect art’s social positioning in a system of inequality’. Nor is it because I fail to ‘recognise ... that ... elitist boundaries are so intrinsic to contemporary understandings of art and aesthetic experience that the concepts collapse without them’. Rather, it is because I take as my starting point the idea that our current approaches to art and the arts, and our cultures that sustain these, are characterised by a TINA compromise form: where the truth in practice – that art is (only) what artists do in the arts, is combined with the falsity in theory – that art is (only) what artists do in the arts. It is precisely through critical realism’s revindication of ontology that we can offer up an alternative explanatory critique as the basis of progressive action and change.

Finally, I don’t provide a metaRealist theory of art. Ideas and concepts I discuss, such as creativity, alethic truth, and care, are ones that are discussed by, and have links to the philosophy of metaReality (PMR), but this does not mean my theory is framed from that perspective. In fact, I purposively and explicitly distance my approach from PMR, outlining my view that Bhaskar’s philosophy of metaReality ‘leap-frogs’ the more immanent epistemological concerns that lie behind our understanding of art and aesthetics. It is this gap which I have sought to fill in terms of Aesthetic Critical Realism (ACR). This needs stressing not so much because I am

reluctant to endorse PMR, but as Alan Norrie suggests because I feel that without looking at the issues I do within ACR 'it might sell the overall system short'. At a factual level, it is also not correct to characterize my approach as 'building on Bhaskar's neglected philosophy of metareality', when it is much more centrally positioned in terms of dialectical critical realism (DCR) and original critical realism (OCR).

A realist theory of art – why does it matter?

I am flattered that Ian Verstegen describes my account of the 'dynamics of the aesthetic within dialectical social theory' as able to compete with influential accounts of Jürgen Habermas or Slavoj Žižek. It is very important to me that aesthetic critical realism (ACR) provides some productive tools to underlabour for human flourishing. I am, of course, equally aware of other apparently less flattering descriptions of my theory-making, including 'eccentric', 'eclectic', 'bemusing', 'insecure', 'incoherent' and lacking 'stability'. With these in mind I begin this final section with some reflections on what ACR brings to critical realism, and why this is important.

Being commissioned by Roy Bhaskar to write a realist theory of art for the Routledge Studies in Critical Realism series presented an unusual opportunity. I had amassed the best part of two decades of learning about critical realism – philosophy applied to (social) science – but I was coming from a place that seemingly was quite 'other' to those around me (for eccentric read *ekcentros* – 'out of the center'; for 'eclectic' – 'not belonging to any recognized school of thought'; i.e. unconventional and strange.) I mention this, in part, because my decision to include Chapter 2 '21 Steps to critical realism' was motivated by the intention to introduce this philosophy to a completely new audience – those working in cultural studies, cultural sociology, aesthetics, arts and related fields. In his review, Andrew Sayer doubts 'if many readers not already familiar with critical realism will get beyond chapter 2's 21 steps'. With hindsight, he may be right (I 'ummed and ahed' as to whether this should be an Appendix). However, I believe an unintended benefit of presenting a fully-fledged meta-theory up-front (in this case critical realism in all its phases) to a previously un-explored field (in this case art), is that it can not only help us to understand the field, but also challenge some of our thinking about the meta-theory. In short, art 'de-stabilizes' and challenges the 'security' of critical realism – albeit, I think, in a generative way. I've already alluded to some of where this is the case, but we can see it in relation to a variety of areas that are central to OCR and DCR. For example: How exactly should we account for the three domains of reality? Is the empirical domain better defined as the semiotic? (Nellhaus). How does this study of experience – a hugely complex and recursive focus of enquiry – problematize the 'actual' (Sayer), 'emergence' (e.g. in respect of the temporal spans involved in processes of metacognition), 'stratification' (e.g. accounting for difference from a constellational (both/and) perspective), 'reflexivity and the internal conversation' (Archer 2003), or perhaps our understanding of 'late modernity' (e.g. our experiences of being between morphostatic and morphogenic society? – see Archer 2014)? Some might think I'm engaging in a sneaky process of deflection here – 'it's not my theory that is unstable or insecure – it's critical realist meta-theory'.

This leads me to my second and related area where a realist theory of art matters. For this, I return to my central focus on caring about experience. In defining art as a practice of caring I am not suggesting that art is an experience of care (though it might be, and indeed, sometimes, is). It is caring because it is a human activity that responds to human need: the need to recognize what we have reason to value. After Joan Tronto (2013), I distinguish four ethical stages of this care:

- (1) Attending to experience (caring about)
- (2) Taking responsibility for communicating this experience (caring for)
- (3) Applying competences in communicating this experience (care giving)
- (4) Responding to the experience of communicating this experience (care receiving)

Take the example [Hurray: an example!] of music. A composer first attends to the world around them (including but by no means limited to its aural nature). According to my theory, this 'attending to experience' is what goes by the name aesthetic experience. In creating the score and giving performances they undertake skilled processes of competently (or otherwise) communicating their experience; these processes are responsive and responded to throughout authorship and continuing after first performance, recognized as of value (or not), and in turn, giving others the opportunity for their aesthetic experiences. The arts matter because they are where this unfolding process of caring about experience is recognized as of value in society (i.e. the primary 'cultural' location of recognition). However, it is central to my argument that the process being described here also takes place in all areas of our doings and beings. This includes, *inter alia*, our theory-making. An important question in the context of this symposium is how (much) do we care for experience in our theory-making?

Theory making is a process of lived, felt, sometimes courageous and vulnerable engagement and encounter which as Ian Verstegen notes is aesthetic, embodied, affective, felt. It is experienced. It is a more or less 'artful' process. Doing art requires tolerating uncertainty, opening ourselves to experience and being receptive to alternative perspectives – and this is where we can and do bridge the space that separates. For this reason, I first of all champion art-based research with my students rather than arts-based research. The former is a meta-theoretical approach or commitment; the latter is an applied methodology. A Realist Theory of Art offers an opportunity to build bridges with Eastern, indigenous, and cultures of the Global South, moving beyond a conception of art that is narrowly framed by rhetorics and practices of the actually existing arts in the West and Western aesthetics. It also offers a wide range of opportunities for building bridges to ideas and themes raised by my reviewers.

Amongst them I would draw particular attention to exploring how my theorization of value and culture (in particular) can be complemented and deepened by Dave Elder-Vass's theory of 'norm circles', which he describes as 'a specific kind of social circles – those concerned with specifically normative questions – having emergent causal powers to influence their members, by virtue of the ways in which those members interact in them' (Elder-Vass 2010, 122). Having sought, but apparently failed to 'take our biology seriously' (my realist definition of experience is founded on a reading of cognitive biology, which emphasizes knowledge acquisition through interactions with the environment (see 59)), I am keen to explore what Andrew terms a 'naturalist ... biopsychosocial' approach. I have begun to do this through direct (not tokenistic) engagement with research on approach-avoid motivation theory, valency, force(s) and energy, but certainly there is scope for doing so much more. In this respect I also very much welcome Ian's encouragement to push the connections I make between the sciences and aesthetics further. To the extent that my argument enables art to be liberated from the culturally limiting contexts of 'aesthetics' or 'sciences', I would say I am for aesthetics (and art) in science, just as I am for science in the arts. I look forward to engaging with one of Ian's 'heroes' Rudolf Arnheim. Certainly, there is much to be valued from engaging widely with theoretical positions that might not be obvious allies with critical realism including, for example, Randall Collins' micro-sociology and interaction ritual chains, or Mikel Dufrenne's work on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience – which Verstegen critiques for its 'excessive idealism'. Reflecting on my 'tolerance' of 'villains', it is precisely in being open to other perspectives, theories, indeed experiences, which is the hallmark of

creativity, and theory-making is nothing if not creative. This said, it is also important to know one's limits. As previously indicated, Tobin Nellhaus's call for connection with Peircean signs, semiosis, and biosemiotics is one I welcome (despite appearances to the contrary). I see this as providing much-needed understanding of artworks and domain-level art practices. Finally, as much as a realist theory of art turns the spotlight on our expressive encounters and interactions, it also encourages greater understanding of our interiority and in this respect further engagement with psychoanalytical approaches. As Alan highlights, this can shed much-needed light on our experiences of being 'in the flow' or 'the zone' and it can help us to move away from the widely held view that such experiences are somehow exceptional, only for elite people who reach a peak, but not for others.

To conclude I would like to 'bridge' to my current research interests in cultural and human development and related policy responses across various projects¹⁰ I've been undertaking since 2015. These are centrally concerned with 'art's social positioning in a system of inequality' (Elder-Vass). In *Development as Freedom* (1999) Amartya Sen introduces the enormously influential notion of 'capability' – the freedom for people to do or be what they have reason to value. This has subsequently been taken up widely, including by the United Nations, whose work on Human Development and the Human Development Index (HDI) is premised on the capability approach. For Sen, determining what value(s) we have reason to value is a matter of public reason. For Martha Nussbaum (2011), by contrast, we can point to a list of central capabilities that are required for a 'basic' level of dignity and what might be termed a 'good life'. Aesthetic critical realism offers fresh insight in respect of our moral and political theorizing, grounding my approach to the EU-funded research project: *Developing Inclusive and Sustainable Creative Economies (DISCE)*, where I'm leading on the development of a Cultural Development Index, and my most recent research into *Cultures of Care*.¹¹ In short, in order to do or be what a person has reason to value they need to have the freedom (capability) to recognize what they have reason to value. I call this cultural capability. In keeping with my dispositional theory of value (100, 135) this is an individually experienced but collectively achieved capability. A realist theory of art draws attention to the crucial role of caring about experience in this process of human development.

As I argue in *The Space that Separates* coming to terms with our betweenness is a lifelong process of 'reality testing' or 'reality checking'. Part of this process involves recognizing what we have reason to value. It is a basic need. Taking responsibility to fulfil this need (albeit a need we never come to fulfil completely) requires caring about experience. We do this, yes, in the arts, where our tools are the poems, symphonies, dances, stories, performances, films, and such like, that provide the inventory of our 'cultural lives'; but also we do this, or can do this, in our science, philosophy, our sports, our engineering and technology, our politics, our education, our theory-making, our therapeutic, health and social care, indeed our expressive encounters and interactions of all kinds, supported by tools (not normally recognized as artworks) and people (not normally recognized as artists). I will continue to make the case for caring about experience in the service of human development. Of course, in the spirit of theory-practice consistency, the challenge is to do this artfully, joining with others to bridge the space that separates.

Nick Wilson

Notes

1. References to Peirce [(1931–58) 1994] follow the standard convention of volume number and paragraph number.
2. For Bhaskarian dialectics, see above all Alan Norrie (2010).

3. Here I recommend the somewhat overlooked book *Rescuing Dewey: Essays in Pragmatic Naturalism* by Peter Manicas (2008).
4. See Gary Hatfield's (2012) essay 'Philosophy of Perception and the Phenomenology of Visual Space' in which he also considers Mandelbaum.
5. About Critical Realism: <https://centreforcriticalrealism.com/about-critical-realism/>.
6. See Bunting (2020), Dowling (2021), The Care Collective (2020).
7. See Bhaskar (2016, 115) on 'ontological monovalence'.
8. This epistemological betweenness is the subject of the book I'm working on now. It is contained within critical realism's opening premise – that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
9. I am careful here not to imply intention on the part of those doing the making – see Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) on 'the intentional fallacy'.
10. See Wilson (forthcoming), Wilson et al. (2020), Gross and Wilson (2018a, 2018b), Wilson and Gross (2017), Wilson, Gross, and Bull (2017).
11. See <https://disce.eu> and www.culturesofcare.com.

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