40

AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

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40.1 Introduction

Aesthetic properties figure prominently in our daily lives, our conversations and actions. I notice the *blazing* fall leaves outside my window. Later at the gallery, you point out the *delicacy* of the cherry blossoms on Sakai Hoitsu's *Blossoming Cherry Trees*. We talk about the *jarring* hand-held camera running scene as we watch the latest episode of *Stranger Things*. Most mornings, I notice the *sleek* curve of my tea kettle's spout. On summer evening, I often close my windows to the *pungent* smell of an upset skunk. Two friends, one a fan of rap, the other not so much, clash over the *powerful urgency* or *droning monotony* of rap, in particular Tupac's *So Many Tears*. Later at a concert, they both revel in the *cacophony* of Shostakovich's *War Symphony*. Even later, they play *Dead Cells* which recreates video games from decades ago to enjoy its *retro* feel and look.

These examples give a small indication of the wide variety of aesthetic properties. Theoretical disagreement prevails concerning their nature, their epistemic and metaphysical status. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there are two points of consensus (which is not to say that even these have gone unchallenged) (see Goldman 2009; Kelly 2014; Levinson 2005b).

1 Many if not all aesthetic properties are immediately perceptible or observable, or a matter of immediate apprehension (in cases of literary works and poems, mathematical or geometrical equations or proofs, scientific theorems, laws or models, etc.).
2 Aesthetic properties are relevant to the aesthetic value of the things, scenes or events that possesses them.

Beyond these two hallmarks, theorists disagree about whether aesthetic properties require exercises of imagination or metaphoric thought, or whether they evoke emotions and feelings. Do aesthetic properties occasion a distinctively aesthetic pleasure, perhaps one that is independent of practical concerns, a pleasure of "mere contemplation" rather than desire? And do all aesthetic properties require trained appreciative and evaluative capacities or "taste" to be discerned?

Insofar as aesthetic properties are linked to our pleasures or tastes, they are open to skeptical challenge. The charge is that attributions of aesthetic properties are subjective and lacking in truth value. A variety of responses are on offer. Some propose that aesthetic properties are dispositional or response-dependent. Another approach is that insofar as aesthetic properties systematically depend on non-aesthetic properties – for example, the aesthetic properties of musical works depend on non-aesthetic properties of sounds such as tones and temporal relationships – this raises the possibility that aesthetic properties supervene on non-aesthetic properties. But do aesthetic properties depend only on a thing's "narrow" or formal properties – such as colours or contours; or are they gestalt in character, dependent on relational features of the larger whole of which they are a part, be that an object, scene, event, etc.; or are they "broad" dependent also on facts of the broader context in which they figure? Last but not least, insofar as aesthetic properties are immediately perceivable and contribute to aesthetic value, this raises issues about the nature of the judgements and claims in which they are predicated. For example, are such judgements and claims only singular, or can we formulate general aesthetic principles concerning aesthetic properties?

In what follows, the second section introduces the heterogeneity and historical dependence of aesthetic properties. I will propose that we add both heterogeneity and historical dependence to the above consensus about aesthetic properties. The third section examines the repercussions of recognizing heterogeneity and historical specificity for explaining aesthetic properties. Can we reasonably expect to demarcate aesthetic properties solely in terms of non-aesthetic properties? If not, this suggests that explanations of aesthetic properties need to draw on other aesthetic notions. The fourth section examines several accounts of aesthetic value to show how they extend to aesthetic properties. Although our aesthetic responses – such as experiences, attitudes, attention, or judgements – might also provide a way to demarcate and explain aesthetic properties, this large set of topics lies outside our scope. The fifth section outlines some of the metaphysical debate between realists and non-realists about aesthetic properties.

40.2 Heterogeneity and Historicism

I suggest that aesthetic properties are heterogenous in that they are made up of sub-kinds of aesthetic properties or individuals that retain their identity – for example, as olfactory or visual; natural, artefactual or artistic. The notion of heterogeneity is common in dealing with mixtures – such as substances, chemical solutions or populations. Smoke is a heterogenous mixture of gas and solid, which retain their identity while mixing together; salad dressing is a heterogenous mixture of two liquids, typically oil and vinegar which retain their identity rather than dissolving in one another to make up a uniform or equal distribution. Though the heterogeneity of aesthetic properties is implicit in typical lists of aesthetic properties, I am suggesting that it is important to make it explicit as a hallmark feature as it plays a role with respect to explanation (as I will show).

In the examples above, aesthetic properties such as cacophony and pungency are specific to things we hear or smell and retain their identity as such. They provide the clearest examples of the heterogeneity of aesthetic properties. But aesthetic properties that can be features of artefacts, artworks and natural beings, which are readily identifiable as such, retain their identity as artefactual, artistic or natural. That is, the identity conditions of artefacts, natural or artistic things are part of the identity conditions of the respective

aesthetic properties. If we turn to the arts, we find further heterogeneity. Aesthetic properties such as dissonance are specific to certain art forms such as music. And the open-endedness of artistic media underscores the open-endedness of aesthetic properties. A whole range of aesthetic properties specific to moving pictures become available that would not have been possible to encounter before the advent of movies, for example.

Insofar as some measure of historicism has become broadly accepted about the arts, it carries over to at least some aesthetic properties of works. Two landmark arguments for the historical nature of visual art by Arthur C. Danto (1981) and Kendall L. Walton (1970) illustrate this point. Analogous considerations hold for other arts such as dance or music.

Danto (1981) offers a relational and historical definition of art according to which artworks embody meanings and extends this view to aesthetic properties. The key is that embodiment of meaning is historical. Danto argues that works like Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* or Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* illustrate that the identity conditions of an artwork must distinguish it from potential lookalikes in any category. Warhol's *Brillo Box* is distinguished from a lookalike carton at least partly by its content. And crucially, the content of *Brillo Box* is determined or fixed by (among other things) the historical and theoretical contexts in which the work is situated. Some contents can only be entertained and embodied in certain historical contexts. A century or two earlier nothing could have meant what *Brillo Box* means.

To illustrate that the aesthetic properties of artworks are bound up with the meaning a work embodies, Danto asks us to imagine a Gallery of Indiscernibles with distinct works of the same size, shape and colour, identified by different titles such as *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea*, *Kierkegaard's Mood*, *Red Square* and *Nirvana*. These works are made by distinct artist of different eras. The gallery also contains two artefacts of the same size and colour, a mere red canvas and a canvas that is a prepared ground for a work by an artist of historical consequence.

Danto's point is that the aesthetic impact of each would be different. The aesthetic properties of *Red Square* are integral to the way it embodies its content, whereas the aesthetic properties of the painted canvas are the experiential impact of its specific colour, sheen, texture, etc. Each work has a different aesthetic impact with different aesthetic properties that are integral to the content each embodies – even though each work uses the same red colour as well as same shape and size canvas.

Insofar as there are no bounds on how an artwork may look – consider *Brillo Box* or *Fountain* – aesthetic properties are correlatively unconstrained, just about "any" property may be aesthetic depending on the content being embodied by the work and the context. Aesthetic properties are not restricted to oft cited examples such as elegance or harmony.

Walton (1970) focuses on a specific range of categories of art to show that some aesthetic properties of individual works depend on such categories. His argument does not rely on a theory of the nature of art and does not tie aesthetic properties to the meanings of artworks. Crucially, Walton delineates categories of art that are both historical and perceptually distinguishable. Discernible media like painting or bas relief, genres such as fantasy, or styles such as Cubist or Brahmsian are historical in that they are "well established in and recognized by the society in which [the work] was produced" (Walton 1970: 357), and the artist could expect their work to be "perceived" in the specific category or could have "thought of it" as being in that category. Walton's point is that some aesthetic properties depend on the conditions or properties that are standard, contra-standard or variable for such historical categories, and such normative conditions are specific to societal contexts and practices.

To illustrate, Walton's best known example situates a particular work, Picasso's *Guernica*, in two different societies where it belongs to different art categories. In our world, *Guernica* is a painting, whereas in the hypothetical scenario it is a guernica. This is a category of works that have the three-dimensionality of bas-reliefs but whose raised surfaces have the same arrangement of surface colours and shapes – those of *Guernica* – but in different moldings. Different parts of the surfaces of guernicas "are molded to protrude from the wall like relief maps of different kinds of terrain" (Walton 1970: 347). There are no paintings in the hypothetical context, only guernicas.

The key is that changing the social context, and thereby the category to which the work belongs, changes some of its aesthetic properties. In our context, the flatness that is standard for paintings makes the markings of the surface which are variable for painting – in this case *Guernica's* sharp angles, edges, shapes and black and white colours – stand out, or to be dynamic or vital or violent. In the hypothetical context, bas-relief molding of figures or markings are standard, so that the flatness of *Guernica* would stand out, making the work boring or bland or serene.

Because only the social context and art categories change, it is not (only) properties such as colours or contours that determine aesthetic impact but rather "which are 'standard,' which 'variable,' and which 'contra-standard,'" (Walton 1970: 338). Some aesthetic properties depend on the normative roles that properties such as colour or flatness have for specific categories. Moreover, in the example, vividness or vitality are properties that the painting *Guernica* has and is correctly perceivable to have. This does not suggest that *Guernica* might not have other aesthetic properties, perhaps purely subjective ones. Rather, the point is to zero in on often discussed perceptible aesthetic properties and show their historical nature.

Walton and Danto's views illustrate at least four important consequences of historicist arguments. First, aesthetic properties can depend on historical context. Second, historical aesthetic properties are objective and correct to perceive or apprehend in a work. This blocks a thorough subjectivism about aesthetic properties. Third, establishing that at least some aesthetic properties are historical blocks a thorough formalism or aesthetic empiricism that holds that all aesthetic properties depend on low-level sensory properties such as colours, contours, sounds, etc. Insofar as some aesthetic properties depend on facts of their historical contexts – so that our experience of them requires some grasp of those facts or conditions – they do not depend only on sensory properties of works and our grasp of such properties.

A fourth result that has not been noted is that, according to Danto and Walton's arguments, at least some aesthetic properties do not depend on what we might call non-aesthetic properties *simpliciter* such as colours or sounds, etc., but on conditions specific to artworks. According to Walton, at least some aesthetic properties depend on the normative conditions for the perceptually distinguishable medium, genre or style of an individual work. Similarly, according to Danto, the aesthetic properties of artworks depend on properties that implicate the identity conditions of works of art as opposed to artefacts (or natural objects) since all these might share sensory properties *simpliciter*.

40.3   Demarcation and Explanation

Since Frank Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts" (1959) and "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic" (1965), it has been standard to draw a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic

properties that corresponds to Sibley's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms. (But see Cohen 1973; Kivy 1973.) The distinction implies that aesthetic properties can be demarcated in a principled way. This is important because it suggests that we might be able to explain aesthetic properties in terms of non-aesthetic properties. But I argue that historical dependence and open-ended heterogeneity make it difficult to *demarcate* or distinguish aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic ones.

Sibley was concerned with the use of aesthetic terms in critical discourse about the arts and he offered a principle for demarcation for these cases: aesthetic terms require taste, whereas ordinary perception is sufficient for the use or application of non-aesthetic terms. His view is that aesthetic terms are not condition governed: no conditions can be stated in non-aesthetic terms for the application of aesthetic terms (or for aesthetic properties). But Sibley's appeal to taste does not demarcate all aesthetic properties since it does not work well for our appreciation of nature and the use of aesthetic terms to characterize natural objects or scenes. One does not need well-trained critical capacities to appreciate the beauty of the sky one day or its gloominess the next (though beautiful nature might be the subject of pure judgements of taste in the Kantian sense).

The considerations in the previous section about the historical dependence and open-ended heterogeneity of some aesthetic properties suggest that just about any property (or term or use) may be aesthetic depending on context. Criticizing Sibley's view, Ted Cohen (1973) points out that many non-aesthetic terms or uses of terms can be aesthetic and provides over fifty examples. Here are just a few: linear, murky, sentimental, suspenseful. (See Eaton 1994.) Moreover, modern and contemporary art show that properties such as being discordant, disunified or heavyset might be aesthetic no less than properties such as being harmonious, unified or delicate. It no longer seems apt to say that there are paradigmatic aesthetic properties.

In view of these difficulties, one might argue that aesthetic properties can at least be distinguished from "low-level" perceptible properties such as colours, shapes, sounds, etc. But artworks in various media illustrate that such "low-level properties" may be aesthetic depending on context. Even a particular stretch of silence may be aesthetic in a specific context as in the case of John Cage's 4′33″. Immersive installations that consist in nothing but colour such as James Turrell's *The Substance of Light* and Carlos Cruz Diez' *Chromosaturation* challenge excluding colours as only non-aesthetic properties. Turrell places us in a foggy light filled space that obliterates all contours and continually melds from one colour to another. Cruz Diez allows us to walk through colourfully illuminated spaces that retain some wall-like spatial contours. In each case, experiences of the specific colours are intensely aesthetic – it is the colours that are aesthetically valuable, each is appreciated for its experiential character.

These considerations against drawing a systematic distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic groups or families of properties do not tell against distinguishing between such properties in a case by case way. In particular cases, if something has some aesthetic properties we can distinguish these from its non-aesthetic ones. This is integral to much critical and ordinary appreciative discussion. My point is that we do not have a principled distinction that can be used to frame explanations. The alternative is to explain aesthetic properties by appeal to other aesthetic phenomena such as aesthetic value or different kinds of aesthetic responses, for example aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic experience or aesthetic judgement. Explaining aesthetic properties in connection with other aesthetic matters would be neither viciously circular nor trivial. If there are good reasons for denying that

aesthetic properties can be demarcated from non-aesthetic properties, it is appropriate to consider more complex ways of picking them out.

40.4 Aesthetic Properties and Aesthetic Value

Let's focus on the consensus view that aesthetic properties contribute to aesthetic value. The challenge is to articulate just what aesthetic value is, and to do so in a way that explains the diversity of aesthetic properties explicitly or implicitly, showing how the account can be extended. Mary Mothersill (1984), Walton (2008) and Alan H. Goldman (1995) illustrate some key strategies.

Mothersill (1984) shows how focusing on beauty can be used for an account of aesthetic properties. Beauty figures on all lists of aesthetic properties, and of course *being beautiful* is a property. But beauty has played the role of the highest or generic aesthetic value – beauty has been the value and aim of art in many historical eras, just as it has been a core aesthetic value for persons and nature. Mothersill's approach treats beauty as our generic term for aesthetic value. She focuses on the singularity of our experiences of beauty to argue that *aesthetic properties cause the pleasure we find in beautiful individuals.*

She takes Thomas Aquinas's view as her point of departure: "Let us call that beautiful of which the apprehension in itself pleases" (Mothersill 1984: 323). Because she approaches aesthetic properties by thinking about the beautiful she can use the hallmark particularity of beauty and the singularity of our experiences of it to propose that aesthetic properties cause the pleasure we find in beautiful individuals.

 (i) Beauty is grasped in singular experiences or judgements, which are conveyed through success verbs such as apprehends, sees and knows.
 (ii) Beauty belongs uniquely to an individual so that beauty is not capturable through general principles.
(iii) If there are no general principles for beauties, then this holds for the properties of beautiful things as well.

Carrying these points about beauty over to aesthetic properties suggests that they are apprehended in singular experiences and unique to the individual one finds beautiful or of aesthetic value. But this raises an instructive problem. If we want to say that it is in virtue of a thing's aesthetic properties that we find it beautiful or of aesthetic value and that these properties are unique to the beautiful individual, then we need to be able to explain their repeatability or generality.

Mothersill offers an unpublished definition of aesthetic properties from Sue Larson (Mothersill 1984: 343).

"q is an aesthetic property" means that for any x, if q of x, then for any y, q of y, IFF y is indistinguishable from x.

(See Nehamas 2007 for recent discussion.)

This definition states that an aesthetic property is a property common and peculiar to individuals that are indistinguishable from one another (where indistinguishability is relativized to the individual person). This may seem uninteresting because if two individuals are indistinguishable then they will have all the same properties – so of course they will

have the same aesthetic properties. But Mothersill's point is that the converse is important: no two distinguishable items can have the same aesthetic properties. On this view, aesthetic properties are unique but also repeatable: they are features of indistinguishable individuals that have the same beauty or aesthetic value. For example, if she finds this pottery mug beautiful, its aesthetic properties are those it would share with all mugs indistinguishable from this one.

Mothersill's final point is that beauty is a disposition and aesthetic properties play a causal role with respect to the pleasure we feel:

> Any individual is beautiful IFF it is such as to be a cause of pleasure in virtue of its aesthetic properties.
>
> *(Mothersill 1984: 347)*

(For recent accounts designed to explain the diversity of beauty, see Lopes 2018; Nehamas 2007; Sedivy 2016. For examples of recent work on aesthetic value, see Gorodeisky 2021; Shelley 2010.)

Walton's (2008) approach explains aesthetic value as a second order value for which diverse first order values are primary. We might summarize his view as follows.

> Something has aesthetic value IFF we take pleasure in admiring an individual for having a first order value and the pleasure is properly taken with respect to that individual.

Aesthetic pleasure involves taking pleasure in our own attitude. Walton's point is that although we might take pleasure in a hot shower, that pleasure is not aesthetic, unless we take pleasure in our own admiration for the hot shower. The notion of aesthetic value is of valuing something not just for the way it is or the pleasure it gives but also for the attitude one takes to it, for "… one's experience of admiring it, … one's judging it to be good" (Walton 2008: 14). "One does not merely enjoy it, one takes pleasure or delight in judging it to be good" (Walton 2008: 12).

Like Mothersill, Walton highlights that "Aesthetic pleasure is not just pleasure taken in *my* admiration of something, but in *its* getting me to admire it" (2008: 14). But instead of focusing on causality, he emphasizes normative conditions: "there must be a certain *propriety* in taking aesthetic pleasure in it; it must be reasonable or apt or make sense to do so" (2008: 14). Aesthetic properties are the properties of an individual that get me to admire it with propriety – they explain not simply pleasure in an object, but the pleasure of admiration.

Walton is explicit that his account is designed to secure the diversity of the things that are aesthetically valuable. "Understanding aesthetic value in this way enables us to accommodate its diversity while locating a common thread. The thread is the pleasure taken in admiring things. The diversity lies in what we admire things for" (2008: 15). Since there are many different values for which we may admire an object, his account has the breadth that aesthetic properties require.

Goldman (1995) offers a two-pronged approach. He explains aesthetic properties in terms of their contribution to aesthetic value while also invoking a Humean analogy between aesthetic properties and secondary qualities. He restricts his focus to artworks to argue that "our basic criterion for identifying aesthetic properties [is] that they are those

that ground or instantiate in their relations to us or other properties those values of art-works that make them worth contemplating" (1995: 20). That is, artworks have a broad overarching aesthetic value: they engage all of our capacities – perceptual, cognitive and affective – by providing an alternative world or whole "to which we must fully attend" (Goldman 1995: 20). More specific values such as being expressive, representational, symbolic or formally interesting contribute to make a work fully engaging and challenging. Aesthetic properties ground or instantiate the more specific values.

Goldman explains aesthetic properties as analogous to secondary ones. He proposes that:

> Object O has aesthetic property P = O is such as to elicit response of kind R in ideal viewers of kind V in virtue of its more basic properties B.
>
> *(Goldman 1995: 21)*

On a Humean approach, ideal viewers or critics play an analogous role to normal perceivers. Whether aesthetic properties can be construed as objective comes down to how we can explain the fact of widespread aesthetic disagreement, which renders aesthetic properties disanalogous from perceptible properties like colours. Goldman's discussion provides a bridge to our next section concerning the metaphysics of aesthetic properties.

Realism about aesthetic properties has to confront the problem that when two viewers disagree, they might attribute different and arguably contradictory aesthetic properties to an object. Goldman argues that this problem saddles realists with the notion of ideal viewers whose judgements are largely free of individual bias (though not entirely free from historical or cultural preferences or outlooks) to explain that (i) there are observers "to whom aesthetic properties appear as they are" (1995: 27); (ii) there can be correct judgements about aesthetic properties; and that (iii) some of our ordinary conflicting aesthetic judgements are not simply different but erroneous.

However, non-realists can argue that their approach to the problem of disagreement is simpler and more preferable. Non-realism appeals to ordinary individuals' experience, training and historical situation to explain differences in attribution of aesthetic properties. Since non-realists are not trying to explain real properties, or the possibility of correct and erroneous judgements, they do not need to appeal to ideal critics. Non-realists charge that intractable disagreement is always possible even when it comes to ideal observers, which undermines a realist construal of the Humean definition.

Goldman's view is that "realism comes in degrees" (1995: 38). We need to recognize *both* that the aesthetic properties of a work are independent of a person's "particular responses to them" *and* that the truth of individual judgements are "not independent of ways they appear to ideal critics, of all evaluative responses to them, or of other aesthetic judgements and beliefs that constitute different tastes" (1995: 38).

40.5   Metaphysical Debates

The metaphysics of aesthetic properties is subject to intense dispute. Should we be objectivists or subjectivists, realists or non-realists about aesthetic properties? Are such properties suited to explanation in terms of response-dependence or supervenience?

In outline, here is what subjectivists or non-realists have going in their favour and what non-subjectivists or realists can claim for their side.

Subjectivists or non-realists suggest that aesthetic properties are not qualities of objects, they are not part of the fabric of the world. They may appeal to:

  (i) faultless disagreement among appreciators;
 (ii) subjectivist accounts of aesthetic value and aesthetic judgements, etc. (Goldman 1995; Wiggins 1998);
(iii) objections to aesthetic supervenience;
(iv) the difficulty of drawing the distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic;
 (v) the heterogeneity of aesthetic terms or properties.

A core motivation for subjectivism is the claim that aesthetic properties are open to "faultless disagreement" among appreciators, as we saw above. Well situated experienced perceivers or critics – even ideal critics – may have irreconcilable disputes over aesthetic properties (Bender 1996, 2005). According to John Bender, "It seems manifest that individuals with the same taste can faultlessly disagree over the aesthetic properties of the same work" (2005: 92). But this is puzzling. If sameness of taste allows for faultless disagreement among ideal critics, it is hard to understand what it is to have the same taste – surely sameness of taste is sameness in our aesthetic preferences and evaluations? If faultless disagreement pertains to ineliminable individual differences, then what is it to have the same taste in such cases? We seem to have lost the notion of sameness of taste, especially in the case of ideal critics.

Aside from the dispute over aesthetic disagreement, non-realists may charge that realists have not given compelling arguments for aesthetic realism, especially if they can show that explanations of aesthetic properties in terms of aesthetic value, response-dependence or supervenience run into trouble. Non-realists argue that the burden of proof is on realists who need to explain why we should favour positing aesthetic properties over more parsimonious approaches that do without them (Matravers 2005).

On the other hand, to show that aesthetic properties are part of the fabric of the world, realists or non-subjectivists can argue that:

  (i) response-dependent properties are properties of objects that involve our responses;
 (ii) historicist arguments provide empirical conditions for at least some aesthetic properties;
(iii) arguments concerning intractable disagreement fail to show that aesthetic properties are subjective;
(iv) realist arguments for aesthetic value can extend to aesthetic properties (e.g., Mothersill 1984; Walton 2008);
 (v) aesthetic properties supervene on non-aesthetic or physical properties.

Let's focus on response-dependence and supervenience. Though realists need to explain aesthetic disagreement, they can avoid being saddled with the notion of "ideal critics" by arguing that aesthetic properties are response-dependent (Jackson and Pettit 2002; Johnston 1989, 1998; Pettit 1983, 1991). If aesthetic properties are response-dependent, it is a priori that they involve responses on the part of subjects. To put it differently, the concept of an aesthetic property involves the idea that subjects have certain distinctive responses. These may differ to some extent. Importantly, a response-dependent property is no less real by involving subjects' responses so long as a case can also be made that the property is one that the object possesses.

This brings us to the debate over aesthetic supervenience. Some realists point out that aesthetic properties satisfy the core idea of supervenience: that there is no aesthetic difference without a non-aesthetic difference (Currie 1990; Levinson 1990). They propose that aesthetic properties supervene on a subvenience base of non-aesthetic properties which are hypothesized to be some sort of structural properties – like colours or sounds – or appearance properties. (See also Levinson 2005a.) This metaphysical picture is consistent with the widely accepted view that there are no aesthetic principles, that sufficient conditions for an aesthetic property cannot be stated in non-aesthetic terms.

But it is arguable that aesthetic properties fail to meet the conditions for supervenience. Supervening as well as base properties need to be demarcated or distinguished from one another. The considerations I raised above undermine the idea of a principled distinction between non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties. In contrast, Nick Zangwill (2023) expresses a widely assumed confidence that "The controversial questions are about the *extent* of the dependence base of aesthetic properties, not *whether* aesthetic properties have some non-aesthetic dependence base" (Zangwill 2023: sec. 2.3). In other words, though arguments for the historical nature of some aesthetic properties suggest that aesthetic supervenience is global and this is problematic for the specific explanatory needs of aesthetics, we can nevertheless be confident that there is some subvenience base for aesthetic properties.

The proposal that mental predicates and properties supervene on physical ones provides instructive contrast. Unlike mental supervenience, aestheticians do not argue that aesthetic properties supervene on physical properties, which can be clearly demarcated from mental and other properties, including aesthetic ones. (For example, see Davidson 1980.) Perhaps aesthetics could argue that aesthetic properties – like many others – supervene on physical ones, but aestheticians strive to find an "in-between" kind of property on which aesthetic properties depend. This would serve a dual explanatory aim: to establish the metaphysical credentials of aesthetic properties while also providing specific explanations of them in particular cases. But this is where problems about demarcating aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties come in.

In short, realists may also place the burden of proof on their opponents: given how entrenched aesthetic attributions are in human life, it is the non-realist who needs to show that an explanation that does not countenance aesthetic properties is best.

40.6   Conclusion

To summarize, I have presented some of the main contemporary trends concerning aesthetic properties in the following way. Greater attention to global aesthetics and historical context, as well as to environmental aesthetics and the aesthetics of the everyday increase our appreciation of the variety and heterogeneity of historical properties. The open-endedness of art forms or media brings open-endedness in their aesthetic properties. We might say that it is open-ended which properties may be aesthetic depending on broad historical context or situation. Yet aesthetic realism is just as thriving – or just as troubled – as nonrealism about aesthetic value and properties.

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