

University of Groningen

Aesthetic Non-Naturalism

Evers, Daan

Published in:
British Journal of Aesthetics

DOI:
[10.1093/aesthj/ayad047](https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayad047)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2024

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Evers, D. (2024). Aesthetic Non-Naturalism. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 64(4), 505-520.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayad047>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Aesthetic Non-Naturalism

Daan Evers^o

Aesthetic non-naturalism is the view that there are objective aesthetic truths that hold in virtue of sui generis facts. This view is seldom explicitly endorsed in philosophical aesthetics. I argue that many aestheticians should treat it as the view to beat, since (a) their commitments favour aesthetic realism, (b) non-naturalistic forms of aesthetic realism are particularly promising and (c) non-naturalists have reasonable answers to four important objections.

1. Introduction

Aesthetic non-naturalism is the view that there are objective truths about beauty and artistic merit that hold in virtue of *sui generis* facts, facts that are unlike more familiar psychological and physical facts (or facts that are in some way constituted or realized by them). This view is not often explicitly endorsed in aesthetics (exceptions are Moore 1903 and De Clercq 2019). In this respect, there is a contrast with metaethics, where non-naturalism has many explicit proponents (e.g. Moore 1903; Shafer-Landau 2003; Huemer 2005; Cuneo 2007; Wedgwood 2007; FitzPatrick 2008; Enoch 2011; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014; Wielenberg 2014).

In this paper, I argue that aesthetic non-naturalism should be treated as a serious option by most contemporary aestheticians. My plan is as follows: I will first describe aesthetic non-naturalism in more detail (§2). I will then explain why the view should seem attractive to many aestheticians (§3). I subsequently turn to four important arguments against it and develop what I take to be reasonable answers (§4).

2. Aesthetic Non-Naturalism

Aesthetic non-naturalists have a number of commitments. First, they take aesthetic judgements to be representational. In other words, they are *cognitivists* about aesthetic judgement. Cognitivists take aesthetic judgements to represent some aspect of the world such that the judgement is correct if and only if the world is as the judgement represents it as being. Non-cognitivists take aesthetic judgements to be something other than (these kinds of) representations of the world, such as desires, emotions or states of pleasure.

Secondly, aesthetic non-naturalists hold that aesthetic judgements represent *mind- or response-independent* facts. Here is how Elizabeth Tropman elucidates this notion:

By ‘response-independent’, I mean truths or facts that obtain independently of the particular responses that any actual or hypothetical agent has toward the object of

aesthetic evaluation. Three general kinds of responses are implicated in ‘response-independence’: (i) aesthetic cognitive attitudes, such as beliefs or judgments about the object’s aesthetic features, (ii) favorable or unfavorable non-cognitive attitudes toward the item, including approval, preference, admiration, disapprobation, and dislike, and (iii) affective feelings afforded by the object, such as pleasure or pain. (Tropman 2022: 62)

Tropman restricts the independence of aesthetic truths from human responses to these particular types (attitudes and feelings) so that objectivists can allow that some aesthetic truths depend on colours and sounds, which many philosophers believe are themselves response-dependent properties (see also §3 of Hanson 2018 for the same point).

Thirdly, aesthetic non-naturalists take the facts represented by aesthetic truths to be discontinuous with the facts studied by empirical sciences. This Moorean characterization can be given more substance by saying that natural properties are properties that have a causal role and can be known about only a posteriori (Shafer-Landau, 2006, endorses the latter criterion). So, according to aesthetic non-naturalists, a property such as beauty is unlike dispositions to cause a positive response or higher-order ways of appearing (as in Levinson 2006 or Sauchelli 2022). Instead, beauty is a *sui generis* property that lacks a causal role and can be detected a priori.¹

Finally, aesthetic non-naturalists believe that (some of) the facts represented by aesthetic judgements *exist*. So they deny *error theory* about aesthetic judgement. Error theorists might agree that aesthetic judgements represent a special kind of mind-independent fact, but deny that reality contains anything like it.

This combination of commitments makes non-naturalists into *realists* about aesthetic truths in the sense defined by Hanson (2018) and Tropman (2022). Aesthetic realists believe that aesthetic judgements represent mind-independent aesthetic facts and that such facts exist.

In summary, aesthetic non-naturalists believe:

- (1) that aesthetic judgements represent mind-independent facts,
- (2) that these facts are unlike facts studied by empirical sciences, and
- (3) that such facts exist.²

Very few aestheticians explicitly identify as non-naturalists, and most views on offer are naturalistic in spirit.³ Two recent examples are Levinson (2006) and Simoniti (2017). Levinson defends the view that (some) aesthetic properties are higher-order ways of

1 I will return to the sense in which it is known about a priori in Section 4.1.

2 Some philosophers who identify as non-naturalists in ethics deny that their view involves metaphysical commitments, such as Parfit (2011) and Scanlon (2014). My characterization of non-naturalism is meant to be neutral with respect to this issue (e.g. Scanlon would not deny that moral facts exist, even if he has a specific theory of what makes such assertions true). I also do not think the distinction between metaphysical and non-metaphysical ways of understanding non-naturalism makes a difference to the arguments in this paper.

3 Exceptions are G. E. Moore (1903) and De Clercq (2019). According to Hanson (2018) and Tropman (2022), the most common view in aesthetics is one according to which aesthetic properties are in some way

appearing. These ways of appearing have the same ontological status as colours, which are detected through the senses. This contradicts the non-naturalist's claim that aesthetic properties are known a priori.⁴ Simoniti argues for a view according to which aesthetic properties are powers to cause experiences in observers. This not only ties aesthetic properties to human responses but also contradicts the non-naturalist's claim that aesthetic properties are non-causal.

Some aestheticians who appear to commit to the response-independence of aesthetic properties are neutral on the distinction between naturalism and non-naturalism. For instance, Malcolm Budd (2014) argues that aesthetic truths are objective, but his characterization of objectivity is only in terms of 'individual-independence' (2014: 10). He is no more explicit in (2007), although we do learn that (some) aesthetic properties consist of the appropriateness or fittingness of certain responses. This view is compatible both with naturalism and non-naturalism because what matters to this distinction is whether properties like being appropriate or fitting are themselves natural or not. Budd does not address this issue in any more detail than Gorodeisky (2021), who defends a similar view about aesthetic value.

The same observations apply to Eddy Zemach (1991). Zemach is a realist who explicitly rejects the idea that aesthetic properties are tendencies to cause responses in observers. But this only tells us that he rejects a particular response-dependent view of aesthetic properties. His realism is compatible with both natural and non-natural response-independent properties.

So, even if some meta-aesthetic views are compatible with non-naturalism, very few philosophers explicitly endorse it. Why should we take it seriously? I will address that next.

3. Why Take Aesthetic Non-Naturalism Seriously?

In defence of ethical realism, metaethicists point to phenomena that would initially favour a realist understanding of ethical judgements, such as:

- [1] The fact that the surface grammar of ethical sentences is identical to that of other sentences that clearly describe aspects of reality.
- [2] The fact that ethical sentences do not contain any relativizing clauses, such as 'X is wrong relative to framework F'.
- [3] The fact that we argue about ethics.
- [4] The fact that we speak of ethical knowledge.
- [5] The phenomenology of ethical judgement: we experience rightness and wrongness as if it is (in some sense) independent of us.
- [6] The fact that we reject some ethical judgements as mistaken and do not assess them as correct in so far as these judgements correspond to the standards of their makers or the group to which they belong.⁵

response-dependent, which makes that view both naturalist and anti-realist, given their characterizations of realism. Hanson (2018) gives a list of non-realist views in the relevant sense on p. 44, footnote 15.

4 Levinson's view counts as a form of realism only because of his additional commitment to the controversial view that colours and ways of appearing are response-independent properties.

5 This list occurs in Brink (1989: Chapter 2).

According to David Brink (1989) and David Enoch (2017), these phenomena make ethical realism the default view: a view we should discard only in the face of serious objections.⁶

All except the last of these markers clearly apply to aesthetic judgement: the surface grammar of aesthetic sentences is identical to the surface grammar of sentences that clearly describe aspects of reality; we do not ordinarily use relativizing clauses such as ‘X is beautiful for Sara’ or ‘Y is a good artwork for John’.⁷ We argue about beauty and the quality of art; we speak of aesthetic knowledge (‘I know that the Alhambra is beautiful’), and nearly all aestheticians accept that the phenomenology of beauty has an objectivist character (Hume 1757; Kant 1978; Scruton 1998; Zangwill 2000; Kivy 2015, etc.).⁸

Empirical studies suggest that the vast majority of lay people reject the idea that judgements of beauty and artistic merit are objective (for an overview, see Cova 2024).⁹ If this is telling, then (6) does not clearly transfer to the aesthetic judgements of the folk.^{10,11} However, most aestheticians accept the analogue of (6) for aesthetic discourse

-
- 6 Don Loeb (2003) argues that similar considerations should make gastronomic realism the default view as well, which may seem doubtful given how implausible realism about the merits of food initially strikes us. He goes on to argue that gastronomic realism can also be defended against various objections by moves analogous to those adduced by moral realists. All of this may seem like a *reductio* of those moves as opposed to a vindication of moral (or aesthetic) realism. However, even Loeb admits that ‘In the end ... I am not sure whether the parallels actually do support such a *reductio*. In fairness, I might have to admit that gastronomic realism has more going for it than meets the eye’ (2003: 31). I think the latter is correct not just because of the fact that even gastronomic realism can be defended against various objections, but also because we have good reason to believe that we need a unified account of normative judgements in different domains. There are too many commonalities between moral, epistemic, prudential, aesthetic and (serious) gastronomic discourse and thought for it to be plausible that these domains are in need of substantially different treatment. An account of these domains can then take either one of two forms: either such discourse and thought is best understood as (aspiring to) objectivity or it is not. So, (anti-)realism about the moral, prudential, aesthetic or gastronomic should stand or fall together.
- 7 Except insofar as this means that Sara and John consider X and Y to be beautiful or good art, respectively.
- 8 What this means (at least) is that our positive responses to beautiful objects strike us as *merited* or *appropriate* and not merely as causal effects (like the pain caused by bumping one’s foot or the feeling of warmth on the skin from the sun). As Paul Boghossian argues in Boghossian, (n.d), this seems to be reflected in our surprise and tendencies to express disagreement when others fail to take pleasure in things we find very beautiful.
- 9 Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for drawing my attention to these empirical findings.
- 10 Of course, we do not need empirical research to establish that ordinary people would not call aesthetic judgements ‘true’ if they are opposed to their own but in accordance with the standards of the speaker. Just imagine a situation in which your neighbour has a new wallpaper that you find very ugly. When the neighbour says ‘what beautiful wallpaper’, it would be dishonest to say ‘that’s true’, even if you know his judgement is in accordance with his standards. But this only shows that we do not assess judgements of beauty as correct insofar as they correspond to the standards of their makers *if there is no difference between being unwilling to call a judgement ‘true’ and thinking of the judgement as incorrect or involving a mistake*. This is not obvious, as we also would not say that ‘the roller coaster ride was fun’ is true if we had no fun ourselves. And it is doubtful that we think of the judgement as mistaken in any serious sense.
- 11 It is important to bear in mind, though, that many studies explicitly introduce contrasts between matters of scientific fact and evaluative domains and are likely to trigger explicit thoughts about the status of the relevant

(e.g. [Hume 1757](#); [Kant 1978](#); [Scruton 1998](#); [Zangwill 2000](#); [Budd 2014](#); [Kivy 2015](#)). The idea that the correctness of some aesthetic judgements is not simply a matter of arbitrary standards is often taken as plausible for comparative judgements such as: ‘The Alhambra is more beautiful than the shopping mall’ or ‘Monet’s haystacks are more beautiful than my three year old’s drawings’. Malcolm Budd makes the point with respect to artistic merit as follows:

it would be absurd for anyone to question that J. S. Bach was a greater composer than I am; to deny, for example, that his *Art of Fugue* is a finer piece of music than the few tones I have in the last minute or so arbitrarily scrambled together under the title *Better Than the Art of Fugue*; or to have any other view than that Jean-Antoine Houdon’s bust of Voltaire is a finer work of sculpture than the bit of stone I knocked about for a minute or so yesterday, pathetically attempting to form it into a likeness of Kant that displays his formidable intellectual qualities; and so on ad infinitum. It would be absurd to question these judgments because it is apparent that Bach’s or Houdon’s work possesses artistically admirable properties that mine lacks; that mine possesses no artistically admirable qualities that Bach’s or Houdon’s does not and that would compensate for those mine lacks; and, accordingly, that Bach’s work is, in an individually independent sense, a finer piece of music than mine and Houdon’s work a finer sculpture than mine. And, as I have indicated, there are endlessly many such pairs of works of art.

([Budd 2014](#): 10–11)

So, many aestheticians believe that the correctness of some aesthetic judgements is not simply a matter of the arbitrary standards of speakers or assessors, and that views that entail the opposite are highly counterintuitive. I will set aside to what extent these impressions are idiosyncratic or natural for anyone who engages more seriously with the arts.¹² What matters to this paper is that realism should be treated as the default view by anyone who thinks that (1)–(6) apply to aesthetic discourse.¹³ This is the norm in philosophical aesthetics.¹⁴

domains in contrast to others. Although this may reveal commitments that are also built into first-order aesthetic discourse, this is not immediately clear. There can be discrepancies between the theories lay people voice when they think *about* certain domains and the commitments they reveal when engaged in discourse *in* the relevant domain ([Björnsson, 2012](#); [Enoch, 2014](#); [Zijlstra, 2021](#)). People may very well behave as if some judgements of beauty are mistaken even if they do not explicitly endorse the thought that there is anything objective about such judgements.

- 12 The fact that a commitment to objective correctness for aesthetic judgements is more common among people with a serious interest in the arts need not be a reason to assume it is unreliable or unwarranted. It may even be the other way around: people with more knowledge of the arts may be in a better position to distinguish between personal preferences and more objective grounds for aesthetic judgements.
- 13 For a more elaborate argument to the effect that various features of moral discourse transfer to aesthetics and make realism the default view in both areas, see [Mast \(2019\)](#).
- 14 It is also an open question whether non-realist views such as non-cognitivism and relativism can satisfactorily account for aesthetic (and other forms of evaluative) discourse. Traditional objections to indexical forms of relativism include differences between the way we report indexical beliefs on the one hand and aesthetic beliefs on the other, and differences in felicitous responses to indexical assertions on the one hand and aesthetic

Of course, even if realism should be treated as the default view by aestheticians, it does not follow that *non-naturalism* should be treated as the default, since realism is the claim that certain facts and properties are mind-independent, not that they are non-natural. But since non-naturalism is a form of realism, anyone who takes (1)–(6) seriously for aesthetic judgement has reason to consider its prospects too.

There are also reasons to suspect that naturalistic forms of realism are hard to defend in aesthetics. One of these is that many aesthetic properties (certainly beauty and artistic merit) are *normative* or *evaluative* properties. In saying that an object is beautiful, we are not merely saying that it has some neutral characteristic (like being grey or multi-layered). Instead, we are *evaluating* the object as having a distinctive kind of positive value. The same holds for artistic merit. Proposed reductions of evaluative properties to non-evaluative properties seem to many philosophers to leave something out: their normative or evaluative aspect.¹⁵

There are further reasons to suspect that aesthetic realism is best developed as a non-naturalistic thesis. One of these is that abstract objects, like proofs or theories, can have aesthetic properties. It is hard to see how these properties could be both natural and mind-independent. This is not because abstract objects can have no natural properties at all. If we allow that people can contemplate abstract objects, then some abstract objects will have the natural property of being contemplated by someone at a particular time. But this is a mind-dependent property (a property that consists in part in a relation to a human mind). It is much more difficult to think of any natural properties that could be exemplified by abstract objects that are not relational. There is a good reason for this too: abstract objects are supposed to be causally inert, at least as far as their intrinsic nature is concerned. If beauty were a mind-independent natural property that some abstract objects have, then this would be an intrinsic property of those objects. But this contradicts the assumption that they are abstract.¹⁶

Another reason to doubt the viability of naturalistic aesthetic realism is that many aesthetic properties supervene on ways of looking and sounding. But the way in which an object looks or sounds most likely depends on the constitution of observers. It is hard to see what mind-independent natural property might depend in this way on mind-dependent properties.

The foregoing problem does not arise if ways of looking and sounding are themselves intrinsic, non-relational properties (a view adopted by Sauchelli 2022). But that view is

assertions on the other (for an overview of these issues in the moral case, see Francén, 2012: 584–86; these all transfer to aesthetics). For an argument to the effect that truth relativism faces similar objections as non-naturalist realism, see Evers (2021). Non-cognitivist views notoriously face issues concerning certainty (Bykvist and Olson 2009), as well as difficulties explaining phenomena surrounding aesthetic testimony (Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018). So even if one is not convinced that realism should be treated as the default view, it is still an open question whether realism is the best account of aesthetic discourse.

15 The argument to the effect that normativity cannot be reduced to natural properties is sometimes known as the *just too different argument*, endorsed in metaethics by Enoch (2011: 4, 107–08), Parfit (2011: 324–26) and Dancy (2006: §7), among others.

16 A referee for this journal pointed out that since abstract objects can have aesthetic but not moral properties, there is at least one reason to embrace non-naturalism in aesthetics that does not hold in ethics.

very controversial (see, e.g. Zangwill, 2000 for an argument against it). Furthermore, even if colours and sounds do not involve relations to modes of sensory representation, then it is more likely that aesthetic properties supervene on response-dependent properties as opposed to the intrinsic properties that give rise to them. After all, artworks are judged for the way they *appear* to us, even if that way is misleading with respect to the intrinsic nature of the object. For instance, if an object has a green appearance although it actually is blue, then the appearance—and not its actual colour—is what matters to its visual beauty.

The preceding arguments are not meant to constitute a knock-down case against naturalistic forms of realism in aesthetics. But they *are* meant to show that, if one wants to be a realist in aesthetics, then non-naturalism is a serious contender.

In what follows, I will bolster the case for aesthetic non-naturalism further by answering four objections to the view. Before I do this, however, I should note that I will restrict my discussion to non-naturalism about beauty (following Hanson, 2018 and Tropman, 2022). Aesthetic properties are a very diverse group, and some properties, such as sadness or playfulness may not be suitable for non-naturalistic treatment. I am primarily interested in properties that are at least partly evaluative in nature. This is not clearly so with sadness and playfulness, but plausibly so with beauty and overall judgements of the quality of art. It also seems to me that if non-naturalism is defensible in the case of beauty, it is likely viable for other aesthetic properties whose nature is, in part, evaluative. This is because beauty has traditionally been associated with pleasure in a way in which other aesthetic properties have not. If non-naturalists can explain this association, then a major obstacle will have been removed.

4. Four Objections to Aesthetic Non-Naturalism

In this section, I will answer four important objections to aesthetic non-naturalism. They do not concern familiar problems regarding the alleged queerness of mind-independent evaluative properties or issues concerning epistemic access. The reason for this is twofold. First, my primary aim is to argue that aestheticians should take non-naturalism roughly as seriously in aesthetics as metaethicists do in ethics. This is compatible with saying that the view ultimately succumbs in both cases to metaphysical and/or epistemological problems. Secondly, metaphysical and epistemological objections to non-naturalism have received extensive discussion in metaethics, so that it is already fairly clear what non-naturalists can say about them. The problems I discuss below are both less familiar and partly unique to non-naturalism about aesthetic truths.

4.1 *The Problem of A Posteriority*

It might seem as if there is a decisive objection to aesthetic non-naturalism about beauty and other aesthetic properties. According to this objection, non-natural truths are known a priori (if known at all), whereas one can only determine whether something is beautiful a posteriori.

But this objection can be answered. Non-naturalists should say that what cannot be determined a priori is the particular way in which a painting looks or music sounds. But the claim that that particular way of looking or sounding is beautiful is not itself a further empirical judgement about it. This view fits nicely with the idea that we can determine whether abstract objects are beautiful or ugly, since these objects cannot be observed through the senses in the first place. In the case of other aesthetic properties that are at least in part evaluative, non-naturalists should say that the evaluative part of the judgement is not itself a posteriori even if other aspects of the judgement are.

What this means is that we should be careful about the distinction between the a priori and a posteriori. At least very often, we cannot determine whether an object is beautiful without using the senses.¹⁷ In this respect, judgements of beauty are often a posteriori. But the reason *why* we need to use our senses concerns the properties on which beauty supervenes. Beauty is not itself visible or audible, although the properties in virtue of which an object is beautiful often are.

4.2 *The Problem of Pleasure*

Another objection to aesthetic non-naturalism is the apparent connection between judgements of beauty and some kind of positive affect. Many philosophers thought it clear that we acquire beliefs about beauty on the basis of pleasure (Hume 1757; Kant 1978; Zangwill 2005, etc.). This means at least that judgements of beauty tend to be *caused* by pleasure and that we take such judgements to be *justified* by a kind of pleasure.¹⁸ By ‘justified’ I do not mean that feelings of pleasure are what we would cite in support of a claim that an object is beautiful. Evaluative judgements are typically justified by appeal to non-evaluative features (this is true even for gustatory judgements). What I mean is that we (implicitly) take it to be *appropriate* as a belief-forming method to be guided in one’s judgements of beauty by pleasurable experiences.

All of this may seem mysterious if non-naturalism is true, because if beauty is a non-natural property, then why should we typically judge that an object is beautiful if we are positively affected? After all, judgements about abstract objects are not typically caused by pleasure either, and abstract objects appear to be essentially non-natural. And why should we treat pleasurable experiences as an appropriate belief-forming method if such beliefs concern pleasure-independent properties?

Might non-naturalists simply deny that judgements of beauty are typically based on (i.e. caused and taken to be justified by) positive affect? For Kant and Hume, the idea serves as a starting point for theorizing about beauty, not something they feel the need to motivate. But even if there are no clear arguments in favour of this idea, there are not many arguments against it either (see De Clercq 2019). It is true that some aestheticians think

17 An ethical non-naturalist would say the same about moral properties.

18 Some may go further and say that judgements of beauty *consist* in a kind of positive affect, but this is a very strong commitment not obviously warranted by the apparent correlation between judgements of beauty and positive affect.

of pleasure or liking as contingently related to assessments of artistic merit (e.g. [Carroll 1984](#)), but we should distinguish between artistic merit and beauty. Beauty is only one aesthetic property that can be relevant to assessments of art as being good or bad. It is much more plausible that judgements of beauty are linked to positive affect than judgements of artistic merit.

Notice also that I am not assuming that *all* judgements of beauty are based on positive affect or pleasure. What seems plausible is the claim that judgements of beauty are typically (or often) caused and taken to be justified by a kind of positive affect. This is a much weaker claim that still presents a challenge to non-naturalism about beauty. If even this much is false, then so much the better for non-naturalists.

It is sometimes suggested that aesthetic pleasure itself involves a representation of aesthetic properties. For instance, [Gorodeisky and Marcus \(2018\)](#) argue that aesthetic pleasure reveals beauty in a similar way as sensory perception reveals shapes, colours and trajectories. [Rafael De Clercq \(2019\)](#) argues that the experience of aesthetic pleasure is identical to the experience of its appearing to you that there is something beautiful.¹⁹ And according to Nick Zangwill, realists ‘will say that, in aesthetic pleasure, we represent objects or events as possessing aesthetic properties’ (2005: 64). Zangwill suggests that this representation involves ‘distinctively aesthetic concepts’ (2005: 64), whereas Gorodeisky, Marcus and De Clercq are more naturally read as invoking non-conceptual representations of aesthetic properties.

If aesthetic pleasure itself involves representations of aesthetic properties, then we can understand why aesthetic beliefs are typically based on aesthetic pleasure: such pleasure involves the representation of non-natural properties. Beliefs about aesthetic properties result from accepting the representational content involved in the pleasure. In this respect, aesthetic experience would be like ordinary sense perception:

we can see that in general there is nothing suspect about a range of judgements that are grounded on experiences, since we make judgements about the external world on the basis of perceptual experience. Perceptual experience is experience with representational content, and our beliefs about physical reality are grounded in or rationally caused by such experiences. A realist view of aesthetics would be analogous in that we judge on the basis of experience.

([Zangwill 2005](#): 66)

This may be a promising route for non-naturalists to take, but it is controversial whether emotions, let alone pleasure, can represent value properties at all (see e.g. [Schroeter, Schroeter and Jones 2015](#)). So it seems to me better for non-naturalists to appeal to something weaker (and almost universally accepted): the phenomenology of aesthetic experience

19 Although De Clercq thinks that the experience of aesthetic pleasure is the experience of aesthetic value as opposed to beauty in my more narrow sense. It seems more plausible to me that beauty is strongly correlated with pleasurable experiences than aesthetic value, although that claim also has some plausibility. It is also not entirely clear whether De Clercq’s view is that aesthetic pleasure itself involves a (non-conceptual) representation of aesthetic properties, but this seems like a reasonable way of interpreting the view.

As indicated earlier, almost all aestheticians believe that aesthetic experience (and the experience of beauty in particular) has an objectivist phenomenology. This can be the case even if experiences of beauty involve affective states that do not *literally* represent aesthetic properties. It suffices that these affective states give rise to the impression that they are somehow objectively appropriate. So long as this is the case, then it is not surprising that we take our judgements of beauty to be appropriate in the light of pleasurable experiences. After all, these experiences come with an impression of objective validity. Nor is it surprising that judgements of beauty tend to be *caused* by states of pleasure. For even if these judgements concern mind-independent properties, our pleasurable experiences appear to us as revealing their instantiation.

In the context of the problem of pleasure, it is less important what explains the phenomenology. It suffices that it is, in fact, like most aestheticians believe. So even if aesthetic pleasure does not involve non-conceptual representations of beauty, or even if aesthetic pleasure does not involve aesthetic concepts, then non-naturalists can still explain why judgements of beauty tend to be based on a kind of pleasure.

4.3 *The Problem of Reference*

A third objection to aesthetic non-naturalism arises from the apparent diversity in applications of the concept of beauty. My friend finds Rossetti's paintings beautiful, but I do not typically agree. I think Buxtehude's 'Sonatae a Due' are beautiful, but my aunt does not. This gives rise to the following puzzle: how can it be that everyone uses the word 'beautiful' to refer to the same property if there is such great variation in how it is applied?

To see why this is a problem, consider the fact that if someone systematically applies the word 'water' to cola, then that is evidence that they mean something else by 'water' than we do. Or consider the view that 'beautiful' refers to the property of tending to cause aesthetic pleasure in the speaker. This fits very well with extensive variation in the use of 'beautiful', but entails that it refers to a different property depending on the speaker.²⁰ So what ties 'beauty' to one and the same non-natural property if people apply it very differently?

Naturalists appear to be in a worse position than non-naturalists to solve this problem. After all, it seems we can agree about an object's descriptive properties but disagree about its beauty. But this behaviour is clearly compatible with a tendency to apply the word 'beautiful' to one and the same *non*-natural property. Perhaps our tendency to apply the term only to items we think *merit* a particular response already provides sufficient constraints on what 'beautiful' could possibly refer to (i.e. the irreducible property of meriting aesthetic pleasure).

20 Of course, it fits less well with certain other aspects of use, like the tendency to ignore the effects of the objects on others when we assess their judgements of beauty as correct or mistaken.

If you are not convinced by this, there is an additional mechanism available to the non-naturalist, as Billy Dunaway (2020) has recently argued in the case of moral terms.²¹ As with aesthetic terms, competent use of the same moral concepts is compatible with large variation in first-order moral views. If moral realism is true, this means that people can apply terms such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to very different actions and still manage to refer to the same (mind-independent) property. Dunaway believes that realists can explain this by appeal to reference magnetism: the idea that some entities are more eligible as referents for words than others due to their metaphysical eliteness (an idea originally developed by David Lewis 1983).

In Dunaway’s view, metaphysical eliteness is a gradable property that roughly consists in being non-gerrymandered, and (therefore) genuinely explanatory of worldly or non-worldly facts.²² If moral properties are (highly) metaphysically elite, and their eliteness makes them more eligible for reference, then eliteness can counterweigh mistaken use dispositions in such a way that even people who systematically apply moral words to the wrong objects can still refer to the same moral properties.

The same idea can be applied to aesthetic terms. If beauty is metaphysically elite, then it is more eligible for reference than more gerrymandered properties, like being such as to cause a particular response in a speaker.²³ Its eliteness can then counterbalance mistaken use dispositions.

Of course, Dunaway does not believe that use dispositions play no role at all in plausible assignments of referents to the terms in a language. He rather believes that reference is a matter of *maximizing fit* between the constraints provided by use dispositions and eliteness. Furthermore, in the case of moral terms, use dispositions are not just a matter of first-order applications of words like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. They are also a matter of the generalizations about rightness and wrongness that people are inclined to accept. So, for

-
- 21 Jussi Suikkanen (2017) has also proposed that non-naturalists can appeal to reference magnetism in order to explain how moral terms acquire non-natural referents, although his proposal is not motivated by the problem of differences in the application of moral terms.
- 22 Dunaway characterizes eliteness more precisely in terms of a three-part role: (1) if two objects share an elite property, then they are more similar to each other than if they share a non-elite property, so elite properties are (more) similarity and dissimilarity-conferring than non-elite properties; (2) elite properties figure in genuine laws as opposed to merely true generalizations, and (3) elite properties are *projectible*, which means that their instantiation can figure as evidence for inductive generalizations (Dunaway 2020: 97–98). The idea is that the properties that fill this role to a greater extent tend to be less gerrymandered.
- 23 Being such as to cause a particular response in a speaker may be a more gerrymandered property than a non-natural property of beauty because being more or less gerrymandered is to do with being more or less unified or fundamental in some way (see Dorr 2019 and Dunaway 2020: 92). Being such as to cause a response in an individual involves multiple components and is ontologically dependent on other things in a way in which an irreducible property of beauty is not. Whether the former property really is more gerrymandered than the latter, however, depends on further commitments about what being unified amounts to and what it means to be more fundamental than something else (and on what, amongst everything that exists, is in fact more fundamental). It is likely, however, that an irreducible property of beauty will not be less fundamental than other kinds of properties.

instance, people may be inclined to accept that if someone acted wrongly, then they are blameworthy, or that wrongness is objective in some sense. If a non-natural property actually has the right connections with blameworthiness and objectivity, then the property makes a good fit with these aspects of use. In that case, even if many first-order applications of ‘wrong’ are off-track, then ‘wrong’ may still refer to the elite non-natural property, as its eliteness *plus* fit with second-order use make for the best overall match with all constraints on reference.

All of this can be applied to aesthetic terms as well. If an elite non-natural property actually plays the relevant roles associated with beauty, then this can counterbalance off-track first-order use. What might the roles be that people associate with beauty? Possible examples are: (1) that it is valuable, (2) that it is artistically relevant, (3) that it presents itself as objective, and (4) that it gives us reason to attend to the object. So, even if some people’s first-order use is widely off-track, they may still refer to the same non-natural property, so long as it provides the best overall fit with the constraints of first-order use, second-order use and eliteness. This might well be the case if an elite non-natural property is in fact a value property, artistically relevant, appears as objective, and gives us reason to attend to objects that exemplify it.

What if you are suspicious of the idea of eliteness, or the idea that eliteness can be an independent determinant of reference? First, as Dunaway argues, anyone who believes that our words determinately refer has reason to take reference magnetism seriously (see his 2020, Chapter 3; see also Suikkanen 2017). Secondly, even if you remain suspicious, you may still accept that reference is a matter of fitting sufficiently well with various patterns of use (both first- and higher-order). If so, then a non-natural property (elite or not) may still be the best overall match with those patterns, especially in cases where not all first-order use is off-track.

4.4 *The Problem of Disagreement*

Even if non-naturalists can explain how people can refer to the same property despite wide variation in their use of ‘beautiful’, non-naturalists also face the task of explaining why people actually diverge in their judgements of beauty: If beauty is objective, how come I fail to see it in Rossetti? How come we disagree about Buxtehude?

This problem is not the same as that discussed in the previous section. There, the issue was how the word ‘beauty’ could be used to refer to the same property by people with very different tendencies to apply the term. The issue now is to explain why some people do not see that an object is beautiful, even if they refer to the same property as others when using the word.

As with the previous problem, this one may be worse for naturalistic forms of realism, in so far as they make aesthetic properties more closely akin to straightforwardly perceptual properties. But the problem is live for non-naturalists as well.

Elizabeth Tropman thinks it can be solved as follows: ‘No one supposes that aesthetic insight is always easy to come by; sometimes it requires a great deal of patience, clear-headedness, multiple exposures, and a certain sensibility before a work’s beauty can come into view’ (2022: 67). So, Tropman thinks that differences in judgements

of beauty result from failures of patience, clear-headedness, insufficient exposure or deficient sensibility. There is no doubt that these phenomena can sometimes account for differences in assessments of beauty, but they seem especially relevant in the case of complex works of art whose nature is not easily gauged by superficial contact. Clearly, however, not all applications of 'beautiful' are to complex works of art. Some applications are to simple works of art or non-art objects (colours, vases, wallpaper, shoes, dogs, etc.). It is not overly plausible that differences in the assessment of colours (or colour combinations) are down to failures of patience, exposure or deficient sensibilities.²⁴

Some might be tempted to deny that the notion of beauty at stake is identical in the case of objects that require serious scrutiny and objects that do not. Perhaps I am merely reporting my *liking* of a wallpaper by calling it beautiful, whereas I am doing something else when judging artworks for their beauty.

But I do not think that is acceptable. First, it seems ad hoc to suppose either that our judgements about wallpaper (and vases, shoes, etc.) never involve ascriptions of beauty or that the property of beauty is never exemplified by such things. Secondly, we should distinguish between beauty and artistic merit. Assessments of artistic merit do plausibly require information and reasoning, even if the work itself is very simple. But this is not as plausible with beauty.²⁵

So we need an additional mechanism to explain why some see the beauty in colours, vases, and so on, while others do not. Non-naturalists may argue that moral judgement is subject to distorting factors such as self-interest, and that there may be distorting factors in the case of beauty too. Some of these involve cultural trends, group pressure or failures to distinguish personal preferences from aesthetic judgements. More importantly, however, non-naturalists can explain some cases of divergence by appeal to the fact that judgements of beauty are closely linked to pleasurable experiences that present themselves as objectively correct. So long as pleasure of this kind is not *necessarily* generated by the presence of the relevant non-natural property (nor necessarily blocked when absent), such experiences can mislead us.

In order for the phenomenology of aesthetic pleasure to be an independent mechanism in the explanation of aesthetic disagreement, we have to presuppose that people can vary in the pleasure they feel even if they do not differ with respect to potential distorting factors such as those described by Tropman and myself. But I think we know this from experience: people do experience pleasure to different degrees with respect to basic

24 Except in so far as the deficiency is just a matter of the inability to detect beauty, in which case appeal to deficient sensibilities is not really an informative explanation of failures to detect beauty.

25 It may be that the beauty of simple works of art is not very important to their artistic merit. But even if that is true, a non-naturalist about beauty should still be able to explain why some people fail to see the beauty in those works.

shapes and colours, and it is not very plausible that this results from failures of patience, clear-headedness, insufficient exposure and similar.

So, it seems to me that non-naturalists can also explain why people fail to see beauty in the same things, even when the appreciation of their beauty does not require extensive knowledge or training.²⁶

5. Conclusion

I have argued that many aestheticians should take aesthetic non-naturalism seriously, since (1) they believe that the presumptive considerations for moral realism apply to aesthetic discourse, (2) there are reasons to think that aesthetic properties cannot be reduced to natural properties, and (3) four important objections to non-naturalism have promising answers.²⁷

Daan Evers[✉]

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

h.w.a.evers@rug.nl

References

- Björnsson, G. (2012) 'Do 'Objectivist' Features of Moral Discourse and Thinking Support Moral Objectivism?', *Journal of Ethics*, 16: 367–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-012-9131-9>
- Boghossian, P. (n.d.) 'Can We Be Objectivists about Beauty?'. Unpublished manuscript.
- Brink, D. (1989) *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Budd, M. (2007) 'The Intersubjective Validity of Aesthetic Judgements', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 47: 333–71. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/aym021>
- Budd, M. (2014) 'Artistic Merit', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 48: 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaeduc.48.1.0010>
- Bykvist, K. and Olson, J. (2009) 'Expressivism and Normative Certitude', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 59: 202–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2008.580.x>
- Carroll, N. (1984) 'Hume's Standard of Taste', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43: 181–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac43.2.0181

26 Ethical non-naturalists face a similar problem with respect to basic moral truths. How come not everyone sees that they are true (especially if they are self-evident)? What failure of reasoning or attention is at work? If we have independent reason to believe that pleasure can present itself to us as merited by its object, then aesthetic non-naturalists are slightly better off with respect to the beauty of simple objects than ethical non-naturalists are with respect to basic moral truths.

27 I would like to thank audiences at the University of Barcelona, the University of Duisburg-Essen, the University of Groningen, Ralph Wedgwood, Ragnar Francén, Frans Svensson, John Eriksson, Bart Streumer, Ryan Wittingslow, referees for other journals and two referees for the *British Journal of Aesthetics* for discussion and helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

- Cova, F. (2024) 'Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics: Aesthetic Judgment', in Bauer, M. and Kornmesser, S. (eds) *Compact Compendium of Experimental Philosophy*, pp. 393–416. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Cuneo, T. (2007) *The Normative Web. An Argument for Moral Realism*. Oxford: OUP.
- Dancy, J. (2006) 'Nonnaturalism', in Copp, D. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, pp. 122–45. New York: OUP.
- De Clercq, R. (2019) 'Aesthetic Pleasure Explained', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77: 121–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12636>
- Dorr, C. (2019) 'Natural Properties', in Zalta E. (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford CA: The Metaphysics Research Lab. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/natural-properties/>. Date accessed 8 December 2023.
- Dunaway, B. (2020) *Reality and Morality*. Oxford: OUP.
- Enoch, D. (2011) *Taking Morality Seriously*. Oxford: OUP.
- Enoch, D. (2014) 'Why I Am an Objectivist about Ethics (and Why You Are, Too)', in Shafer-Landau, R. (ed.) *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems*. New York: OUP.
- Enoch, D. (2017) 'Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics', in: McPherson, T. and Plunkett, D. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, pp. 29–42. London: Routledge.
- Evers, D. (2021) 'Relativism and the Metaphysics of Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 61: 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayaa016>
- FitzPatrick, J. (2008) 'Robust Ethical Realism, Non-Naturalism, and Normativity', in Shafer-Landau, R. (ed), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Volume 3*, pp. 159–205. Oxford: OUP.
- Francén, R. (2012) 'Moral and Metaethical Pluralism: Unity in Variation', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 50: 583–601. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2012.00138.x>
- Gorodeisky, K. (2021) 'On Liking Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 102: 261–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12641>
- Gorodeisky, K. and Marcus, E. (2018) 'Aesthetic Rationality', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 115: 113–40. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201811538>
- Hanson, L. (2018) 'Moral Realism, Aesthetic Realism, and the Asymmetry Claim', *Ethics*, 129: 39–69. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698732>
- Huemer, M. (2005) *Ethical Intuitionism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hume, D. (1757) 'Of the Standard of Taste', California State University, Long Beach. <https://web.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r15.html>. Accessed 8 December 2023.
- Kant, I. (1978) *Critique of Judgement*, tr. Meredith, J.C. Oxford: OUP.
- Kivy, P. (2015) *De Gustibus: Arguing about Taste and Why We Do It*. Oxford: OUP.
- Levinson, J. (2006) 'Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility', in id. (ed), *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics*, pp. 315–35. Oxford: OUP.
- Lewis, D. (1983) 'New Work for a Theory of Universals', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61: 343–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048408312341131>
- Loeb, D. (2003) 'Gastronomic Realism—A Cautionary Tale', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 23: 30–49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0091226>
- Mast, S. (2019), 'Is Aesthetic Realism as Plausible as Moral Realism? A Conditional Positive Argument for Aesthetic Realism'. Research Master Thesis in Philosophy, University of Groningen.

- Moore, G. E. (1903) *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parfit, D. (2011) *On What Matters Volume 1*. Oxford: OUP.
- Sauchelli, A. (2022) 'Aesthetic Realism and Manifest Properties', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 80: 201–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaac/kpab076>
- Scanlon, T. (2014) *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: OUP.
- Schroeter, L., Schroeter, F. and Jones, K. (2015) 'Do Emotions Represent Values?', *Dialectica*, 69: 357–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-8361.12108>
- Scruton, R. (1998) *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. (2003) *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford: OUP.
- Shafer-Landau, R. (2006) 'Ethics as Philosophy: a Defence of Ethical Nonnaturalism', in Horgan, T. and Timmons, M. (eds) *Metaethics After Moore*, pp. 209–232. Oxford: OUP.
- Simoniti, V. (2017) 'Aesthetic Properties as Powers', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25: 1434–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12224>
- Suikkanen, J. (2017) 'Non-Naturalism and Reference'. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 11: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v11i2.111>
- Tropman, E. (2022) 'How to Be an Aesthetic Realist', *Ratio*, 35: 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rati.12324>
- Wedgwood, R. (2007) *The Nature of Normativity*. Oxford: OUP.
- Wielenberg, E. (2014) *Robust Ethics. The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*. Oxford: OUP.
- Zangwill, N. (2000) 'Skin Deep or in the Eye of the Beholder? The Metaphysics of Aesthetic and Sensory Properties', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61: 595–618. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2653614>
- Zangwill, N. (2005) 'Aesthetic Realism 1', in Levinson, J. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: OUP.
- Zemach, E. (1991) 'Real Beauty', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XVI: 249–65.
- Zijlstra, L. (2021) 'Are People Implicitly Moral Objectivists?', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 14: 229–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-021-00593-y>