Aesthetic Value as a Tertiary Quality? 1

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Preamble

Those who would defend the possibility of objective normative properties owe us plausible examples of what such a property might be, how our normative discourse and practices might reflect or be shaped by it, and how we might be able to speak of it and know it.

Discussions of normativity have tended to focus on deontic or directive (ought/ought not) judgments rather than evaluative (good/bad) judgments. Many have claimed that evaluative judgments can simply be defined in terms of deontic concepts plus some naturalistic attitude, as in: ‘x is good = x ought to be desired for its own sake’. But others doubt this, myself included, and do not find credible the definitional priority of the deontic. And within normative ethics, increasingly many suspect that deontic categories have been too central in modern ethics, and properly occupy a more limited station in morality. 2

Historically, a number philosophers have looked to aesthetic value in order to explain in what sense normative judgment might be objective, among them Hume (“Of the Standard of Taste”), Kant (Critique of Judgment), and Wittgenstein (“Lecture on Aesthetics”). In this paper I explore this idea within a broadly naturalistic setting, gleaning some cues from these philosophers along the way from these philosophers concerning how a theory of objective value might be developed.

Uses of aesthetic value

As a rank amateur in thinking about aesthetic value, I had better start where I am most familiar – the practice of aesthetic evaluation. Broadly conceived, aesthetic evaluation involves a wide range of types, terms, and contexts of assessment, from unselfconsciously gustatory to self-consciously artistic. This practice, from what I can tell, is ubiquitous in human life, social and personal. Like acquisition of one’s native language, ability to participate in this aesthetically

2 Defenders of virtue theory have been prominent among these, but there are also those who argue against the “legalism” and notions of blameworthiness and punishment (as well as the associated emotion of guilt) characteristic of deontic assessment.
evaluative way of life seems to be something people almost universally learn to do without special training, though there is a very large role for the shaping process of growing up into elaborate and structured discourses and practices.

Here are some examples I have found convincing of aesthetic evaluation at work. Philosophical theorizing might be well advised to pause at the outset to ask what needs it might answer to, and these I take to be examples of instances in which individuals show a real need to reach for the notion of aesthetic value.

Klopstock. In his transcribed lecture on aesthetics, Wittgenstein tells the story of reading some odes by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1893), a poet who influenced Goethe and the Sturm und Drang movement, as well as the emergence of the distinctive compositional tradition of the German song. Wittgenstein had read Klopstock before, and found it “moderately boring”. But one day he noticed a metrical marking at the front of Klopstock’s poems. Rereading the poetry following this marking, Wittgenstein couldn’t help thinking, “Ah-ha, now I know why he did this”, and couldn’t help grinning, “This is grand”. Recounting the episode, Wittgenstein notes that, although he produced this evaluative term spontaneously, that was not the defining feature of the experience, “the important thing was that I read the poems entirely differently, more intensely”, and that he rushed to share this with others, “Look! This is how they should be read.”

Wittgenstein tells us that we can begin to understand aesthetic value if we focus from the outset on appreciation, and certainly appreciation is what Wittgenstein has experienced when he broke into a smile while reading Klopstock in a new way. Appreciation, moreover, is certainly part of what was expressing when he rushed to others to insist that they try reading it likewise, to share his discovery. Should we conclude from this paradigm case that evaluative aesthetic language functions primarily to express this sort of appreciative attitude on the part of the speaker? Certainly, a speaker often feels urgent need for evaluative aesthetic language when he has an appreciative attitude: “This is grand,” Wittgenstein avows, not “This I like”. There seem, however, to be other needs for evaluative aesthetic language:

The Windy Night. Samuel Taylor Coleridge lived for some time with depression, “A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear”. In his ode “Dejection” he walks under the racing clouds of windy night sky:

3I am grateful to David Hills for this reference.
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

Coleridge’s despair is heightened by the sense that he can no longer feel appreciation of a
night sky that he knows is beautiful. He is a sufficiently experienced and assured judge of beauty
that he has no hesitation about judging it so. This wild night sky possesses to a high degree
beauty-making features known to him from experience – appreciation of it as beautiful would
indeed be appropriate and warranted in his view. Moreover, his lack of appreciative experience –
however involuntary and thus outside the scope of a practical ought – apparently strikes him as
showing an aesthetic defect on his part, a loss of sensitivity, not a change or diminution in the
aesthetic qualities of the night sky.

Coleridge as much as Wittgenstein needs the notion of aesthetic value to explain what he
believes he has experienced. His account of his condition that night, and what it said about
himself, involves an assertion that there was in fact available beauty around him: the sky truly
was excellently fair – nothing “inverted commas”-ish about that. If his aesthetic judgment does
not express appreciation, does it not express an evaluative stance, a claim of aesthetic authority,
which commends appreciation to others? Yes, but in the way that assertions of all sorts
characteristically do: assertion is not a mere sign or symptom of belief, but a public act of
expression that plays a distinctive role in communication. Assertion that p implicates that the
speaker believes that p, that p is contextually relevant, that the speaker has standing make this
claim, and so on. Coleridge’s sincere assertion implicates his belief that the sky is beautiful and
his authority to claim this, and implies – via the truistic connection between aesthetic value and
warranted aesthetic appreciation – that it indeed warrants aesthetic appreciation. He makes a
claim on behalf of this, and would only mislead us about his state of mind if he said, “It’s a
beautiful night, as I see it, but that’s just me.” If he took himself to be no judge of beauty,
unqualified to lodge a claim of warranted aesthetic appreciation, where would the poignancy of
his failure to feel appreciation lie?

Aesthetic appreciation, then, should not be understood “judgmentally”. That is, we
should not claim that aesthetic appreciation is a matter of judging something to be beautiful, or of
doing so on the basis of one’s immediate experience of it – Coleridge is making an aesthetic
judgment while immediately experiencing the night sky, yet appreciation eludes him.
Furthermore, insufficient as it might be to constitute appreciation, aesthetic judgment might not even be a necessary part of it:

_The Railway Cut._ Camped at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau has plenty of time to lay out in his journal an elaborate and categorical scheme of values. He celebrates ‘Nature’ and castigates the folly of surrounding humanity’s “Saint Vitus’ dance” of work and “improvement”, writing that “I love the wild not less than the good”, and sees in wilderness “our preservation”.

He singles out the railroads for particular criticism: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.”\(^4\) Naturally, then, when he takes a shortcut to town along a recent railway cut, he is appalled when he comes upon a hillside torn open by digging. However, on subsequent days he finds himself lingering at that gouged embankment as he walks to town, gazing upon it attentively. Though he still condemns this violation of nature, an “illicit” appreciation of the strange beauty the scene was making itself felt in him without benefit of an aesthetic judgment.

Eventually, this fascination is seen by him as the appreciation that it is. We find in his diary:

> Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village … . [Walden 2048]

As the winter faded into spring and the embankment warmed, he wrote:

> You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows into. [Walden 2050]

He has been forced beyond a simple dichotomy of “the wild and the good” vs. “improvement and waste”. Instead, he has come to recognize a dialectical relationship between man and world: “There is nothing inorganic” (Walden 2050).

Thoreau’s aesthetic learning was possible because he was capable of an aesthetic appreciation that is not at first recognized as such, and that is not licensed by his own aesthetic judgment or self-ascribed value scheme. His attention was arrested by the bank and his fascination engaged before he understood that he was appreciating it. Unlike Coleridge, he is encountering a beauty unfamiliar to him, which enters into his mind and eventually gains recognition by being felt but not seen as such. Just as Coleridge’s sincere aesthetic judgment seems to possess truth conditions independent of his own mental state, so is Thoreau’s mental

\(^4\)Walden, pp. 2035-2036. I am grateful to Stephen Railton for discussion of Thoreau.
state independent of any judgment of aesthetic truth. Appreciation might cue, or be evidence for, judgment, but it can do this precisely because it is thus independent.

All three stories have involved not only an appeal to a role for genuine aesthetic value – as an object of discovery, a possible content of judgment, and an explanation of experience – but also an effort to share this value, to offer it in some way to others. Aloud, immediately, with friends, or through the silent medium of writing. The putative communicability of aesthetic value is in fact a central feature of it, and a central phenomenon in our lives, even in surprising ways:

_The Favorite Song._ In the car, my teenage son often stops roaming the radio dial to tune into a song that pops up. After a while, he’ll ask me, “So, what do you think of this song?” I listen for awhile, trying to grasp a few of the lyrics, and often end up giving a mixed response: “Well, the beat’s interesting, but I’m not too keen on the words …”. Typically, he is gratified by my clear lack of enthusiasm. Aesthetic judgment, after all, can be about having a distinctive identity as well as sharing. One day, after listening to a song he’s queried me about, I have to admit something different: “Well, you know, I like it. I’d have to hear it again get a better idea of it, but I’d like to.” A day or two later, he piped up, “You know, that is the one song I like that it doesn’t bother me that you would like.”

“Oh?” I asked, fishing for a bit of explanation.

“Well, usually it bothers me if you like a song I like. But that’s a good song, with good words, and good music. So I’m glad you like it.”

He was coming to me with this song in the spirit that Wittgenstein rushed to show others how to read Klopstock. I would have let him down if I hadn’t liked it. It would suggest that I’m closed-minded, unable to get past surface matters of presentation to see underlying qualities. Perhaps, too, he was hoping for some confirmation of his judgment. If the song was as good as he thought it was, it would be relevant evidence that someone with different musical experience and preferences would also like it. This was not a matter of wanting me on “his side” in the world of ins and outs. It’s clear what side he wants me on that score. He wanted to gain some evidence of his own ability to appreciate value – that the song’s appeal was not a matter of mere novelty, hype, or subcultural self-identity. Genuine aesthetic goods should in principle be above these dynamics, and communicable across such divides.

Some aesthetic responses, at least, we hope to explain by the aesthetic qualities of the object itself, not by any narrower identification or non-aesthetic interest. One is not just following trends without independent discernment, jerked around by peer pressure or the
recording industry; one possesses aesthetic responses that deserve the respect of others, and of oneself. Kant writes:

[One] rightly lays claim to everyone’s assent, even though [one’s] judgment is empirical and a singular judgment. [CJ 191]

Kant, of course, has his own explanation of the ground that affords this claim such universality, even though it arises from a subjective experience of pleasure: “the basis of [one’s] pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of reflective judgments, namely, the purposive harmony of an object with the mutual relation of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding) that are required for [all] cognition.” [CJ 191]

Our conversational life is full of exchanges of aesthetic opinions, and, we take it, aesthetic information. The institution and practices of reviewers, critics, guidebooks, etc. reflect the thought that judgment concerning value can have public meaning and make a claim of some authority for others, even if appreciation remains private. Reviewers can gain credibility by drawing our attention to phenomena, features, or possibilities not familiar to us, that we can, with suitable experience or understanding, find convincing in our own aesthetic experience. Similarly, when consult one another’s aesthetic opinions about everything from eating to high art, we need not view ourselves as deferring to a personal authority – we can see others as a source of evidence concerning where aesthetic value might be found, where appreciation is warranted. And we look to the judgment of a still wider community, seeking out those “classics” in any domain, which have stood the test of time.

Willingness to submit one’s current aesthetic opinions to various forms of learning or correction is a way of expressing a commitment to stay focused on aesthetic value as such, despite our individual variations and limitations: aesthetic excellence should be capable of winning, and explaining, recognition by widely-experienced and sensitive individuals, or by a wide and enduring community of appreciation across time and place. A. A. Milne wrote, of a contemporary book he deeply admired and recommended as a classic, “When you sit down to it, don’t be so ridiculous as to suppose that you are sitting in judgment on my taste, or on [the author’s] art … . You are merely sitting in judgment on yourself. You may be worthy: I don’t know. But it is you who are on trial.”5 But what might aesthetic value be that it could have this sort of character or effect? Or that we might be not only pleased but proud to have its acquaintance?

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Objective cognitive aspiration

To earn our way to a conception of aesthetic value that could live up to these examples, we will need to understand not only where, if at all, aesthetic value might be situated in the world, but also how to vindicate a discourse in which we speak of perception, evidence, and explanation, and claim—or demur about—authority, knowledge, and informativeness. We will call this the objective cognitive aspiration of aesthetic evaluation, though we must be careful to notice that there are wide and narrow senses of both terms.

A domain is ‘cognitive’ in the narrow sense when its discourse possesses truth conditions; and ‘cognitive’ in the wide sense, to the extent that it indispensably or constitutionally involves cognition, the exercise of understanding, perception, belief, reasoning, hypothesis, and imagination. A domain is ‘objective’ in the narrow sense when it concerns the metaphysics of objects, that is, the portion of the universe that is not constituted by subjects or subjectivity, the “objectual” if you will; it is ‘objective’ in the wide sense to the extent that it involves conditions of correctness and evidence that are independent of opinion, and permit an explanatory appearance/reality distinction. Such a distinction exists when we can point to this reality to help explain appearances and meanings in this domain, and so provide epistemically or semantically informative accounts of the form ‘We believe that \( p \) because \( p \)’. We need not say additionally that the fact that \( p \) is itself of a narrowly objectual metaphysical character, although it cannot be a mere projection of our own opinions. Here we will mostly be occupied with the wider notions of cognitive and objective.

Some skepticisms

Thanks to its objective cognitive purport, aesthetic value has seemed an easy target for skepticism, demotion, even dismissal. It smacks of self-congratulatory projection, social condescension, and cultural chauvinism. It manages to sound both quaint and dangerous. And there is a sobering history of using notions of “high” culture to exclude large segments of the population and reinforce social hierarchy.

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6 Various kinds of meta-aesthetic non-cognitivism (in the narrow sense) could claim this sort of objectivity. But they would be rejecting a certain reading of the idea of “projectivism”.

7 See, e.g., the work of historian Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu,
Yet we can’t seem to lose the aesthetic habit, or want to be rid of it. Even when we are feeling sincerely pluralistic and self-critical, or trying to countervail against the forces that operate upon or within us of status, chauvinism, and self-conceit, we are more likely to do so by attributing some authority of the life experiences and cultures of others than by expressing outright skepticism about value all around.8 Surely it is reassuring to hear that Nietzsche, whose writings aim to dissolve the mystique and importance of many of our grandest values, wrote that “Life without music would be an error”?9

What sort of error? In Nietzsche’s case, we know it could not be simple loss of happiness, for happiness can be had in many ways. As Kant put it, if all we wanted were sensual gratification, a massage might do as well or better than an epic poem. And, in any event, on Nietzsche’s view, “Only the Englishman seeks happiness”. “Irrationality”, too, is unlikely to be Nietzsche’s diagnosis, though it seems fair to say that he is telling us something we ourselves might put this way: there is reason to incorporate music into our lives, and if we miss it that is a loss of considerable magnitude.10

Valuing and liking

From a remarkably early age and continuing even through the “officially” nihilistic years of adolescence, we humans use and understand the distinction between what is liked and what is or seems to be good – even when the liking is strong and very much our own. And we do not make the same claims on behalf of likings as valuings – “I do like that sort of kitsch, but it’s just a personal thing.”

To be sure, liking unquestionably plays a foundational role in all that concerns taste, and the bare possibility of an aesthetic community depends in the largest sense upon a potential commonality of genuine liking. It would be a hopelessly alienated aesthetics that missed the

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10 The “normative force” of aesthetic reasons, then, might not be as a demand of rationality as such, so that it would be irrational not to heed them. Even reasons for belief do not have that status (there simply are too many of them, for a start). Happily, discovery of the value of music typically is a natural consequence of exposure – music is one of the most universal human phenomena, and much basic music learning seems spontaneous.
irony in Twain’s remark, “Don’t worry. Wagner’s music isn’t as bad as it sounds.” There must be some way of coming to want to hear it, and finding reward in that. Thus Wittgenstein writes:

The rules of harmony, you can say, expressed the way people wanted chords to follow – their wishes crystallized in these rules (the word ‘wishes’ is much too vague). [Lectures and Conversations, “Lecture on Aesthetics”, 6]

(A number of contemporary accounts of the aesthetics of music second this idea that chord tension and resolution form one of the fundamental elements of appreciation.) And Kant writes, of aesthetic contemplation (a “nonconceptual awareness of a harmony (with a certain indeterminate form) between imagination and understanding” [Pluhar]):

Both the agreeable and the good refer to our power of desire and hence carry a liking with them … . [CJ 209]

There are evolutionary and functional reasons for expecting that, at least in some areas typical of aesthetic evaluation, a commonality of basic liking is likely to be found among humans. Humans have been group foragers from the start, hunting and gathering, needing to work together to identify nutritional resources and avoid toxins. Given the leading role of gustatory likes and dislikes in influencing what we seek or consume, tastes would likely have been co-adapted to group foraging needs within a late Pleistocene environment. We should, then, be fairly good models of the gustatory likes and dislikes of one another. More generally, important advantages in terms of sociability, mutual coordination, sexual selection, group solidarity, and self-defense would accrue to individuals within populations if individuals were able spontaneously to model one another’s thoughts, preferences, motivations, and emotions. So we have some basis to believe that a common aesthetic practice could rest upon a widely shared psychological basis. Facts about human agreement in aesthetic opinion, at least given suitable exposure and experience, could be explained by more than a pressure exerted socially to co-ordinate or conform – there would be clusters of natural features upon which agreements would tend to converge. But where would something like aesthetic value come in?

Valuing and correctness

The simplest suggestion is afforded by subjectivism, which in its raw form holds that value judgments report likes and dislikes, perhaps one’s own, perhaps those of a group with which one identifies. But raw subjectivism leaves unexplained what is special about the state of mind that made Wittgenstein want to say “This is grand” rather than “I really like this – you will,
too”. When we take an aesthetic term into our mouths, we voluntarily shoulder a certain responsibilities to speak on behalf of something more than actual liking, whether mine, yours, or ours.

The language of valuing wears an aspiration to correctness on its sleeve. Mis- has two standard meanings, “wrongly or badly” (as in misspell) and “failure to, lack of” (as in mistrust). If I meet Norm, but take him for Jeff, then my belief is a both a taking and a mistaking. But suppose I am immediately suspicious of Norm. Then my feeling is not both a trusting and a mistrusting. I simply fail to trust him, rightly or wrongly. To misvalue is both a valuing and a mistaken valuing. But to dislike is not both a liking and disliking – and this is independent of how likeable something turns out to be.

Valuing belongs to the family of notions that have something like correctness conditions, so that they can apply genuinely to errors: spelling, estimating, classifying, judging, measuring, etc. Among such words, some are concerned with correctness vs. incorrectness rather strictly; others concern correctness in degree or magnitude, and admit of shades. If I write ‘folklor’ instead of ‘folklore’, I do not underspell it. But if I say, “It’ll take 1 cubic yard of concrete” when sizing up the needs for fixing my sidewalk, then I have underestimated if it takes a yard and a half. Value belongs to this latter group. If I size up a person’s worth as small, but in fact it is large, I have misvalued her by undervaluing her.

An account of aesthetic value should help us see how valuing attitudes and value judgments could have correctness conditions despite being intimately linked to attitudes or affect that lack such conditions, such as qualitative liking. 11

The metaphysics of value (1) – akin to a secondary quality?

Some contemporary subjectivists seek to solve this problem by treating aesthetic value, or value in general, as akin to a secondary quality. 12 Ordinary secondary qualities like colors or

11 We need to be careful with a term like ‘correctness’. As I’m using it here, ‘correctness’ is not to be understood as a matter of something like ‘aesthetic correctness’, as if this were the key term of aesthetic praise. As Wittgenstein puts it, musical composition involves understanding how to get chord resolutions right, and so involves various sorts of “aesthetic correctness”, but:

When we talk of a Symphony of Beethoven we don’t talk of correctness. Entirely different things enter. … In certain styles of Architecture a door is correct … [b]ut in the case of a Gothic Cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct. [LC 7-8]

The notion of correctness which is in play in the discussion above is the notion of being able to take the measure of value right or wrong more or less accurately. It therefore is the perfectly generic notion of a correctness condition or a truth condition for a judgment or proposition – a semantic rather than aesthetic term.
sounds involve an ineliminably subjective element – a qualitative state. Nonetheless, we can share secondary-quality judgments, get them right or wrong, be more or less expert and authoritative about them. I am no expert on color, and defer to many sources of authority and correction. I do so, however, in part because I am convinced even by my own rough and imperfect experience that the distinctions and relations color experts and standards of measurement discern correspond to something real. They’re more sensitive to it than I am.

What is this something that the experts and the measures have mapped out so well? It is a set of distinctions and relations grounded in experienced qualitative similarities that arise from the normal working of the human color perception apparatus. For this reason, it is not quite right to say that red (for example) is a matter of “producing in the subject a qualitatively red sensation”. This could happen in all manner of non-standard ways, due to peculiarities of person or circumstance. Rather, it is closer to:

\[ X \text{ is red } \equiv X \text{ produces a qualitative experience of redness when visually perceived in daylight by normal humans as they actually are.} \]

Such an account involves not only causation of appearance, but an entry-point for something like correctness or incorrectness. There is a definite gap between an object looking red to me and an object being red, a difference even in my own opinion (I myself might believe the lighting nonstandard, say). I can also see what sort of information can be given or received by pronouncing on color, and how more or less authoritative claims might be lodged. ‘Normal’ and ‘actually’ have the effect of rigidifying the term and to that extent objectifying the discourse of redness despite the subjectivity of color experience. Thus when I say ‘is red’ rather than ‘seems red to me’, I shoulder different responsibilities and can have a different aspirations to informativeness and correctness. We can have a practice of sharing, disputing, and developing standards for such judgments, despite their firm anchoring in subjective experience. And thus the possible kinship to aesthetic value.

But proponents of the secondary-quality analogy have also pointed out that ‘aesthetic value’ and ‘beauty’ are different from ‘red’ in an important way. The proof of the pudding may be in the eating, and, as John McDowell puts it, aesthetic experience may have an experiential phenomenology of “an encounter with value”,13 and yet:

\[ X \text{ is aesthetically good } \not\equiv X \text{ produces via sensation a qualitative experience of aesthetic valuableness when perceived by normal human beings as} \]

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they actually are. After all, one would not think that mapping out of how things “seem aesthetically” to normal human beings as they actually are provides the touchstone of aesthetic value. Aesthetic value is a matter of what merits or warrants appreciation, not what normally elicits it.

If valuing is to be a matter of “awareness of value as something residing in an object and available to be encountered”, one must ask what this encounter is like and what the proper conditions of availability are if they are not “actual normalcy”. Presumably, availability must at least have to do with actual or possible human capacities. Kant acknowledged, for example, that reason is “not enough” for the appreciation of beauty, and that we must be equipped not only with reason, imagination, and understanding, but also possess enough of the “animal” to be capable of a relevantly similarly sensory “presentation” and experience [cf. CJ, 210]

Clues from a standard of value

We might try to capture the notion of ‘merit’ or ‘warrant’ truistically linked to value by taking a page from what Hume had in mind in proposing a “standard of taste”: crank up from ‘normal’ capacities to a full refinement of human sensory, cognitive, and imaginative faculties, conjoined with a full understanding of a work’s character and context. There exist many independent ways of assessing how thoroughly or accurately these capacities are developed – independent, that is, of the context of aesthetic judgment as such. Cranking up further, we can require a convergence of response or judgment among those qualified as similarly sensitive. Cranking up yet another notch, we can require that this convergence extend over time, and that it be in some measure seconded over the long haul by the responses of the wider human population. We are, in effect, looking for constraints that provide evidence that what we working with is a reasonable gauge of the full range and capacity of human faculties, minimizing the effects of preconception, inexperience, ignorance, prejudice, inattention, or lack of imagination or sensitivity. Still, however, what Hume is proposing is a gauge of a magnitude, not the magnitude itself. For example, the international standards for measurement for weight are not themselves the very stuff of weight, but an effective, shared way of gauging it. Hume’s account is a standard of taste, not a metaphysics of value. If we want the latter, we must ask a further question:

Suppose Hume to be right about how we might construct a “best available” gauge of aesthetic value. Can we read backwards from this to a theory of the nature of aesthetic value

14 Ibid.
itself? What might value be, such that we can in these ways improve our authority or reliability in judging it? And how could the magnitude itself be part of how we explain the why the gauge is reliable?

According to Hume, aesthetic value depends upon “a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind”, such that:

Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ. [ST 231, 233]

It might look as if we are being invited to identify beauty as a projection of a distinctive internal state onto those objects that produce it, and Hume certainly sometimes speaks that way. If this were so, then looking to aesthetic value to explain our judgments of beauty would involve a kind of error – akin to the error of thinking that thorns possess “painfulness”. For Hume, beauty does yield pleasure or gratification, yet “pleasurableness” is not what we are predicating of the objects we deem beautiful. Indeed, we are bent on distinguishing beauty from pleasurableness. Experts on our mulit-dimensional space of qualitative pleasurableness are not our experts on beauty, even descriptively. The notion of beauty attaches to objective features that fit or match certain sensory, cognitive, imaginative, and affective capacities in sensitive perceivers. The beautiful we find on the object side of this relationship, while appreciation and reward is what we find on the subject side. (Recall Moore’s conception of the organic whole of aesthetic value as involving attentive appreciation of a beautiful object.)

*Concept vs. standard*

At first, this might seem to be a shamelessly naturalistic conception of value, an attempt to reduce a normative concept, beauty, to a complex natural one, viz., that of being disposed to yield intrinsically rewarding experiences in sufficiently sensitive and attentive humans owing to the joint operation their sensory, cognitive, affective, and imaginative faculties. It seems as if any truly aesthetic ‘ought’ or notion of ‘merit’ has been pushed from the scene.

‘Aesthetic value’ and ‘beauty’ are normative concepts, they afford a distinctive non-naturalistic way of thinking and talking about the world. For this way of thinking and talking, it is *a priori* that beauty merits or warrants appreciation, whether it causes it or not. But at the same time, a relationship to the natural is also *a priori* of beauty, as with normative and evaluative terms in general. Their attribution is to be held responsive to the non-normative world.
Two states of the world identical in their non-normative features are to receive the same aesthetic evaluation, and these are the features we point to in giving justifications for sameness or difference in aesthetic judgment. This sort of evaluative supervenience need not be a metaphysical thesis – even non-factualists who might deny the existence of aesthetic properties in any robust sense can nonetheless claim there is an a priori regulative constraint on value-attribution and aesthetic judgment to this effect. And we know a bit more besides about the linkage of the aesthetic to the natural: it is also a priori that aesthetic value has a fundamental connection with (potential) appreciative liking and enjoyment.

So let’s not take Hume’s proposal as a proposed naturalistic reduction of normative concepts – indeed, one readily doubts whether the other concepts he uses (refinement, perfection, suitable sensitivity or sufficient information, etc.) can be analyzed in non-normative terms. Rather, take Hume to be offering an account of the non-normative worldly infrastructure upon which normative aesthetic discourse and practice supervene. Thanks to relevant similarities of the “internal fabric” of humans, and the internal functional architecture of perception, cognition, affect, and imagination, certain things are “naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments”, and will do so to a greater and deeper and more enduring sense than others. This characterization picks out those features of the world that Hume denominates “the beauties”, the worldly base for correct application of the concept ‘Beauty’.15

Identifying beauties as such can be genuinely informative to our fellow human beings: these are features or objects in the world such that suitably sensitive attention to them can yield intrinsic reward in otherwise normal humans. As a result, these beauties can be created and shared with others with some expectation of an appropriate uptake, independently of many other ways we might differ with one another in our personal attitudes or ambitions, or in power or status. The intrinsic reward arising from appreciation of such beauties is nothing self-interested or exclusionary, and thus can underwrite a community of shared distinctly aesthetic judgment. Consider the Kant-inspired notion of aesthetic appreciation as intrinsic enjoyment arising from disinterested, free, but structured interplay of our higher capacities, as induced by the perceptual experience of objects. A map of the beauties would be a map of those features of the world suitable sensitivity and attention to which can induce this process in a rational being.

This is a structural-functional characterization in a broad sense. The felt nature of aesthetic appreciation and reward can be as diverse as the conditions that induce such a dynamic process in the psyche. This makes sense if we consider the variety of objects of genuine aesthetic

15 Cf. Moore’s distinction between “the good” (the good things, which can be characterized naturalistically) vs. “Good” (an unanalyzable nonnatural concept).
appreciation: from a meal, to a natural scene, a face, a film, a book, a song. What qualitative feature is common to these diverse cases? Beauty has no particular color, taste, or “look”. In this respect, aesthetic value is unlike such canonical secondary qualities as red, the experience of which is (on a standard view) tied to a specific intrinsically qualitative state. Aesthetic value by contrast crosses the sensory modalities, as do many of the components of aesthetic assessment (such as harmony, clashing, tension, resolution, and so on). These features are closer to roles or relationships than to definite locations in quality space.

Metaphysics of value (2) – akin to tertiary quality?

What sort of thing is aesthetic value itself, then? Objective or subjective? In what sense, if any, is it somehow constituted by or dependent upon a response in the subject? If aesthetic qualities in the world are constituted in the way the Humean account suggests, then our subjective responses can become attuned to them as we enlarge our experience, understanding, and sensitivity. These phenomena and features will “call for” our attention, motivate a contemplative interest, and reward our experience of them.

[When] obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men. [ST 233]

Let us think of a model of aesthetic value that does not treat it as a qualitatively-specific secondary quality like red, but as more analogous to what Locke called a tertiary quality, a power in objects to produce changes in other objects, which then can affect our experience in various ways.

Thirdly [in an enumeration of the three species of qualities], the power that is in any body, by reason of the particular constitution of its primary qualities, to make such a change in the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of another body, as to make it operate on our senses differently from what it did before. [Essay, p. 109]

The sun, for example, has the power to turn solid, white wax into a clear fluid, so that it affords a different experience to us. “These,” Locke notes, “are usually called powers.”

Now it requires a bit of a stretch to apply Locke’s idea of a “change in motion” to the effects produced by an object of aesthetic appreciation when it sets in action the various components of one’s psyche – cognition, imagination, affect, emotion. And we must think of the

16 A related terminology in metaphysics suggests itself: aesthetic value is a determinable, while actual human aesthetic goods are determinates.
“operation on the senses” as a matter of internal rather than external sensation, for example, the experience of intrinsic reward. Finally, we must be willing to think of power not as a brute force, but as a capacity to induce changes in a specified class of interactions. An enzyme, for example, has the power to catalyze certain reactions, not by supplying its own energy, but by making it happen when otherwise it would not. A gravitational field has the power to shape the trajectories of particles and the orbits of planets. Making these (liberal!) allowances, we can say that aesthetic value is a power to induce in us through sensation certain characteristic processes, which yield, among other things, a sense of intrinsic reward. Indeed, Hume speaks in general of aesthetic experience as “trying” or testing the “force” of a work (ST 232). What distinguishes aesthetic value is the nature of the processes that give rise to the experience of intrinsic reward. If we could attribute the intrinsic reward instead to self-interest, snob value, etc., we would disqualify the claim that it is an experience of genuinely aesthetic character.

Locke would almost certainly not approve of this appropriation of his term. Still, it might do as an analogical model better than primary or secondary qualities, since it captures the idea that aesthetic value is not a feature which is directly encountered in experience like shape or color, but which experience can nonetheless give us a clear sense of having felt. An excellent novel, for example, or what Wittgenstein calls a “tremendous” work of art (LC 8), has the power to set in motion in me a complex but structured process involving virtually all parts of my psyche. The experience of this process, difficult or disturbing as this sometimes is, can be something I undeniably find rewarding. While I am engaged with it, and often as a result in an enduring way, a great work changes me. At a given age or stage, I might not be ready for such a work, or not ready to respond to its full force. To someone attuned to the work, however, there is no question that this is a sense of power, a confrontation with value, even though it has no distinctive qualitative character: one is bowled over by it.

But enough. Doesn’t it spoil any hope of a serious analogy with real powers that the changes set in motion by aesthetic force absolutely require some previously-existing receptivity on the part of the subject? That would be too quick. Powers generally depend for achieving their effects on a correlate susceptibility in the objects influenced. An enzyme will catalyze only certain interactions among certain molecules. A non-magnetic object passes through a strong magnetic field without showing any effect while objects containing iron or possessing some elements with magnetic moment couple with the field, and will “feel” its shape and magnitude and orient in it.

To be sure, feeling aesthetic force depends not upon our possession of any particular physical composition, but upon our possession of a combination of interlocking perceptual,
cognitive, imaginative, and affective capacities, however they are physically constituted. These capacities will be extensively shaped by prior experience, and thus can vary from individual to individual, population to population. That need not remove all prospect of objectivity, however, if responses would tend to converge under fuller experience, knowledge, acquaintance, etc.

What if there are populations fated not to converge, however, owing to fundamental differences in perceptual, cognitive, or affective psychology? Given the structural-functional understanding suggested above, it would seem we can make good sense of the idea that individuals whose psychological faculties differ fundamentally from our own could nonetheless experience (say) particular combinations of hues or tones as harmonious or clashing in the same generic sense we do. They might therefore have a domain of appreciative experiences inaccessible to us – even when we are contemplating the same objects. Indeed, our own color palate could change overnight discontinuously, such that the familiar colors were gone from our qualitative lives, without our losing the ability to appreciate chromatic harmonies and disharmonies in a thoroughly familiar sense. 17

Would these alternative sensory or psychological bases also afford beauties or aesthetic value in a thoroughly familiar sense? It would seem that aesthetic value can be found in the appreciative lives of these different or changed individuals in just the same sense in which it can be found in ours now. Sensory experiences that induce in the perceiver a harmonious interplay of cognitive and imaginative faculties, and yield intrinsically rewarding experience, can be found in both populations. And within each population there can arise a shared practice of evaluation, seeking to identify those things that reliably and enduringly have this effect upon attentive perceivers, independently of their personal attitudes or interests. Do our actual points of potential appreciative convergence deserve the name ‘beauties’, and theirs not? 18

Relativism

Are we able to affirm the cognitive aspiration of aesthetic evaluation only at the cost of relativism? Not quite. Relativism, as I understand it, anchors a set of terms or judgments to an essentially particular, indexed reference group. On such a picture, ‘beauty’ in the alternative community’s discourse would simply fail to be the same word as ‘beauty’ in ours. There would

18 To be sure, we cannot place upon them a demand that they appreciate the beauties we do – ought implies can. But each of us can ask of the other the recognition or respect accorded to an aesthetic practice.
be no available non-indexed notion of genuine aesthetic value, so I could not correctly use my term ‘aesthetic value’ to acknowledge the features to which an alternative community is attuned. Relationalism, by contrast, introduces not fixed indices but variables. On the Humean view, it is possible to say that there can be many different classes and types of beauties, harmonies, objects or events with genuine aesthetic value and force. (Hume, for example, speculates that the aesthetic values to which one is responsive as a young man differ somewhat from those older adults can appreciate.) They would all be accurately so-called by me, even when they are of a kind I am unequipped by my susceptibility to respond to appreciatively. I could nonetheless credit these alternative aesthetic judgments with truth and objectivity – and accord them some authority as aesthetic if joint decisions need to be made. Possessing beauty would be an invariant characteristic across these different clusters of beauties.

Within the human population, it becomes an empirical question how large or enlargeable are the communities susceptible to a given class of beauties. We do have increasing evidence that arbitrary human variability in matters relevant to aesthetic appreciation is much less than one might imagine. This evidence of similarity extends into the perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes that underwrite aesthetic experience. As with language, surface variability tends to obscure fundamental commonalities in underlying structure and process. Moreover we have ample historical experience of the aesthetic accessibility of the accomplishments of other human cultures, akin to the linguistic accessibility of their languages – given, in both cases, sufficient exposure to and learning of a novel idiom our part. And the question of wide and enthusiastic aesthetic accessibility of culturally-distinct cuisines, by now, goes without saying.

19 I won’t speculate here how such a joint practice might be developed, beyond according mutual respect. Unless there were ways of achieving novel, appreciable syntheses or juxtapositions, the question of a joint practice could be more a matter of a modus vivendi than shared aesthetic domain.

20 Experimental aesthetics has a long but somewhat checkered history. Still, there has been a steady accumulation of findings about widespread, culturally non-specific similarities, some of which (like the similarity of underlying grammars of natural languages) can itself be used as a basis for cultural variability. See, for example, the historical summary in R. Bouveresse, Esthetique, Psychologie et Musique (Paris: Vrin, 1995). More recent neurophysiological work on the central case of music shows that musical syntax is processed in much the areas as linguistic syntax, and that the sense of dissonance in a chord corresponds to rather distinctive internal patterns and processes of neural response. Key seems more culturally variable than melody or “spacing”. And imagination of events redeploy the amygdala in patterns similar to those in first-hand experience or anticipation. See B. Maess, et al., “Musical Syntax is Processed in Broca’s Area: An MEG Study”, Nature Neuroscience 4 (2001); Ruby and Decety, M.D. Hauser and Josh McDermott, “The Evolution of the Music Faculty”, A.D. Patel, “Language, Music, Syntax in the Brain”, P. Janata and S.T. Grafton, “Swinging in the Brain: Shared Neural Substrates for Behaviors Related to Sequencing and Music”, and I. Peretz and M. Coltheart, “Modularity of Music Processing”, in Nature Neuroscience 6 (2003).

21 Works like Christopher Alexander’s Pattern Language or Grant Hildebrand’s The Origins of Architectural Pleasure suggest that diverse human architectural idioms have a similar aesthetic accessibility: we can find genuine appreciation and reward in coming to know and live with them. See C.
But still, all this remains contingent, and any honest statement of this relational form of objectivity must admit that, in principle, there could be genuine beauties – beauties meriting the name every bit as much as our treasures – that are not accessible to those with ordinary human capacities. If Martians have quite different senses, they could nonetheless build an aesthetic practice upon this infrastructure, as capable of tracking real beauties as ours, even though the objects they identify leave us cold, baffled, disgusted.

I rather welcome this thought. My sense of arithmetic and logic, such as it is, seems to demand that I think that ‘4’ is the correct value of the sum ‘2 + 2’. Alternative number systems are alternative number systems, introducing new terms and new definitions. By contrast, my sense of beauty or aesthetic value, such as it is, does not require me to view alternative appreciative practices as changing the subject away from aesthetic value. If this is right, then although a demand to appreciate other domains of beauty will not extend universally, a demand to recognize the corresponding aesthetic judgments as valid can do so. For neither this judgment nor its acknowledgement require aesthetic appreciation of its object on the part of the speaker or hearer. We should be able to say, in our own words, “Martians have an impressive and delicate sense of aesthetic value, and elaborate aesthetic practices. They are attuned to many beauties we humans will never know first-hand, and their creations merit the appreciation they show them.” After all, would we not view it as an aesthetic gain were we able to extend the scope of our experiential or imaginative power to share the Martians’ appreciative experience?

The role of aesthetic attitudes and concepts

An objection might spring up from a different quarter, however. Is it fatal to any such “force sensitivity” picture of aesthetic appreciation that it permits genuine aesthetic appreciation to arise without the intermediation of any distinctively aesthetic attitude, standpoint, or concepts? For all we have said, “aesthetic force” can be operating upon an individual or a practice in the absence of any thoughts with distinctively aesthetic conceptual content. And this might look too automatic and non-evaluative to count as a form of normative guidance.

That might not be a defect. Recall Thoreau’s experience on the railway cut. While his judgment was busily condemning the despoiling of the wild, an aesthetic subversion was occurring from within. The aesthetic force of those convoluted, multi-colored forms was working its effects on him, drawing his eye to linger on the scene, causing his faculties to work off-scene.

Or imagine someone carving wood idly, or shaping a pot for utilitarian purposes. His hand might, by chance, effect some change that begins to register itself as interesting well before any thought has occurred of judging its interest. Wittgenstein is surprised to find Klopstock much more deeply interesting as he reads along in this new way. “We don’t start from certain words, but from certain occasions and activities” (LA 3). His judgment of Klopstock changes, and does find words, but that is thanks to activity of getting absorbed in reading it and finding, as it draws him in yet more intensely, that he is smiling. “I might not have said anything. The important fact was that I read it again and again” (LC 4).

It seems to me crucial to a credible epistemology of objective aesthetic value that aesthetic value be able to affect us in this “subversive” way – subjective yet not mediated by an opinion or judgment. What we need is a notion of appropriate evidence for aesthetic judgment, evidence that does not presuppose agreement in judgment, opinion, or value, and that can undermine or confirm judgment experientially. Evidence of this kind could help correct us if we have gone astray, strengthen a conviction, or introduce us to an element of value heretofore unknown to us.

Further, this comports with a picture, mentioned earlier, of giving others experiential evidence or reasons for aesthetic judgment which do not demand that they first accept the standing or authority of our judgment. We can invite them to try something, to cultivate knowledgeable attention to it, to see quite simply what that is like. On a force-sensitivity conception, aesthetic value cannot be directly observed, but it can be detected by “the feel of it” – how something makes one see, think, or feel. In appreciation as opposed to reflective aesthetic judgment, Kant observed, beauty is “not brought to concepts”. Since appreciation does not presuppose judgment, it affords the most compelling sort of evidence for judgment.

An advantage of allowing this sort of “bottom up” experience to count as guided by aesthetic value is that it might enable us to make better sense of the spontaneity of creative aesthetic acts. Writers sometime say they start a story not with a plan, but rather with a scene, and image, a character, or a situation and a few phrases. Once started, they follow with pen (or keyboard) where the scene, character, etc. seems to be leading them, following along associatively while being quite uncertain where it will end. “I’ll have to see – I haven’t tried writing it yet.” Such an approach to writing (or painting, or design) can be thought of as guided along at countless points by sensitivity to the aesthetic “feel” of evolutions in the narrative, tacitly selecting or seeking elements of an evolving story. An author might not be able say, even after writing, exactly what makes a story work (or fail to work), and others may credibly “find in it” sources of interest or value that the author disavows having intended to put there.
To return the example of my son’s favorite song, he and I were, in effect, counting on the possibility of our having joint access to “bottom up” aesthetic evidence: my adult attitudes and assimilated culture and his adolescent attitudes and assimilated culture should not stand in our way of finding common ground for a warranted judgment if we can really attend to the song itself – to its music, its words, and their interplay. We can converge, we believe, if we are both fair. And we can cite the aesthetic force of the song – managing to pull us out of narrow or hierarchical roles and occupy a shared aesthetic plane as equals for a moment – to explain our convergence, offering it to others in turn to help confirm our judgment.

**Normativity**

By speaking thus of confirmation and evidence in such “plain vanilla” terms, have we not lost track altogether of the normative character of aesthetic discourse? On the present account, while it is possible to be led to judgment by appreciation, it is also possible to judge that an object has aesthetic value by theoretical knowledge of how it would catalyze (or not) elements in the psychological infrastructure of aesthetic value. A theorist could make this evidence-based judgment without experiencing any appreciative attitude toward it or feeling any pressure to do so. In what sense, then, would this judgment represent a judgment that the object is an *appropriate* object of appreciation, or *to be recommended*? What accounts for the characteristic normative force of aesthetic judgment in advocating appreciation or condemning failure to appreciate?

Once we have reflective aesthetic concepts, we can use them to recommend to others who understand them and who are capable – or who can become capable by training or further experience – to translate them into experience. For them, this promises to prove intrinsically rewarding. Since we normally assume that we form a community of potential appreciation, aesthetic judgments characteristically implicate appreciation, enthusiasm, and commendation. Our audience will be missing something if they ignore the judgment. Life without music is an error, for all but a few. And yet this sort error remains distinct from a different one, of judging music to be without value. The former is a mistake in living for all except those rare individuals constitutionally incapable of experiencing music’s force; the latter is an error of fact for anyone.

In the end, the attempt to invest normative force in aesthetic judgment will be bluff if there is no available infrastructure to make aesthetic force felt in appreciative reward. In ordinary settings in which we exchange and debate aesthetic views, we assume that this infrastructure is in place, giving to our aesthetic assertions mutual relevance and commending force. Were this not
so, no special normative aesthetic language could introduce genuine aesthetic command, or an aesthetic *ought*. In our four examples, individuals are offering up what they claim to be assessments of aesthetic force. We can decide to try that force. If they’re as sensitive as I think they are, and humans are as alike in the compass of their capacities as we are supposing them to be, then we can come to feel this force first-hand.

Postulating a universal appreciative terrain is not a precondition for a shared practice attuned to genuine aesthetic values. Life without music almost certainly is an error, but other humans or other intelligent beings could have lives rich with music and its value even though Bach and Ellington cannot win their appreciation, and their music cannot win ours. Of course, I regret that they cannot hear what I hear in a poignant phrase on a flute or saxophone; but, then, I also regret that I cannot hear what they hear in their instruments and idioms. This is an aesthetic regret: it is not only more enjoyment that I seek (though that is not to be lost sight of), it is an enlarged appreciative understanding, a greater knowledge of beauty and aesthetic value in all their forms. It is in this thought – not in the thought that our capacities delimit aesthetic value universally or that certain shapes or sounds exclusively warrant appreciation *a priori* – that I think I have my best grip on the cognitive and objective aspiration with which we began.