A BALANCED REALITY FOR AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

by

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(Under the Direction of René Jagnow)

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an explication of Jerrold Levinson's arguments for the realism of aesthetic properties, insofar as he claims that some are real as response-dependent properties, and others are real as non-response-dependent properties. A range of objections are considered before finally concluding that Levinson's position fares no better than the anti-realist's version of aesthetic properties as dispositions.

INDEX WORDS: Aesthetic property, Perception, Metaphysics

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my family and some inspiring friends, with special thanks

to Michael for all of the patience and encouragement he gave me over all the years that I spent

studying philosophy.

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CHAPTER 1

AESTHETICS AND THE REALISM DEBATE

In the present thesis, I offer an explication and critique of Jerrold Levinson's theory of aesthetic property realism. In evaluating his position, a range of objections will be considered, including research findings from the field of cognitive neuroscience, and issues addressed by an opponent thinker Derek Matravers - who advocates an anti-realist dispositional interpretation of aesthetic properties. By the end of my discussion, I hope to have demonstrated that despite the thoughtful complexity of Levinson's realism, his theory is no more compelling than the sort of anti-realist dispositional position held by Matravers.

Importantly, by juxtaposing these hallmark aesthetic property positions, and by recognizing the inevitable internal collapse of Levinson's notion of 'uniquely aesthetic content', one ultimately can realize that the distance from an aesthetic property realist to an aesthetic property anti-realist need not be so insurmountable, granted the acknowledgment by both parties of the nature of human aesthetic experience entailing some sort of relational interaction with properties of perceived objects. Perhaps the most significant implication of this conclusion is that it may ultimately broaden the way we think about whether other individuals of similar aesthetic training and sensibility levels *ought* to agree with the aesthetic judgments that we make. Before explaining the particulars of all of this, it should be helpful to provide a bit of background to the debate on the realism of aesthetic properties.

Frank Sibley initiated the debate on aesthetic properties by asking, what could it mean to say that 'a dancer is graceful'? Many scholars, whether of the *realist* mindset or not, would agree

that this utterance entails the application of an aesthetic term to an object. What, though, do we mean by 'aesthetic'? Surely we do not intend to include in this term's extension everything that comes to us by way of sensibility, for that would establish too broad a scope of referents. Fortunately, Sibley offers a helpful articulation of the meaning:

> The remarks we make about works of art are of many kinds. In this paper I wish to distinguish between two broad groups. We say that a novel has a great number of characters and deals with life in a manufacturing town; that a painting uses pale colors, predominantly blues and greens…Such remarks may be made by, and such features pointed out to, anyone with normal eyes, ears, and intelligence. On the other hand, we also say that a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving; that a picture lacks balance, or has a certain serenity and repose, or that the grouping of the figures sets up an exciting tension…The making of such remarks as these requires the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation. Accordingly, when a word or expression is such that taste or perceptiveness is required in order to apply it, I shall call it an *aesthetic* term or expression, and I shall, correspondingly, speak of *aesthetic* concepts or taste concepts.[1]

Despite adopting a characterization of aesthetic terms as demanding an exercise of taste or a particular sort of perceptiveness, it remains difficult to offer a neat comprehensive definition for them. Various attempts have been made to list all of the possible types of aesthetic terms, and to specify all the sorts of circumstances in which they might occur. However, Sibley is famously known for constructing a compelling argument to show that aesthetic terms cannot be *condition-governed* by non-aesthetic features.[2] In other words, he claims that there are no sufficient criteria, such as a certain number or type of non-aesthetic features, which would necessarily justify the presence of a particular aesthetic attribution. Sibley does not deny that non-aesthetic features are characteristically associated with aesthetic terms, but he does argue that no set of non-aesthetic features can serve as *conditions* for the application of aesthetic terms. He offers many examples in support of his argument, emphasizing a central distinction between a possible set of qualities needed to label someone *intelligent* versus the impossibility of providing an

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[1] See Sibley's "Aesthetic Concepts," p. 494.
[2] Ibid., p. 496.

indubitable description of some set of features that should be labeled *graceful*.[3] Importantly, this

belief led him to posit the existence of actual aesthetic *qualities*:

> No doubt one way of putting this is to say that the features which make something delicate or graceful, and so on, are combined in a peculiar and unique way; that the aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colors and shapes…[4]

Much of Sibley's work lay an important grounding for further thinking about the nature of

aesthetic properties and the extent to which they may function like other types of perceptual

properties that we regard as objective. Immanuel Kant, of course, ignited this debate much

earlier on when he claimed that judgments of taste, although based on subjective responses to

experience, lay claim to universal validity just as empirical judgments do.[5]

What then is there to say about whether the aesthetic attribution 'graceful' actually refers

to a property of the dancer herself? For starters, many scholars agree that our aesthetic

attributions refer to something we can call an *aesthetic experience*, and that non-aesthetic

properties play some sort of role in causing this experience. There also seems to be general

consensus about the fact that a significant amount of agreement among aesthetic attributions or

judgments can be observed, such that it warrants an explanation, even if plenty of disagreement

among aesthetic judgments is also acknowledged. The point of divergence in the realism debate

then occurs when attempts are made to explain (1) what exactly is responsible for causing these

'aesthetic experiences' and (2) what can account for the degree of agreement observed among

aesthetic attributions or judgments.

Philosophers have responded to Sibley broadly in two ways. *Realists* argue that objects

instantiate aesthetic properties, and *anti-realists* reject this, claiming that the notion of aesthetic

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[3] Ibid., p. 498.
[4] Ibid., p. 500.
[5] A discussion of the universal validity of judgments of taste appears in Kant's "Critique of Judgment", trans. Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1928).

properties is superfluous since the properties that objects instantiate can be captured in entirely non-aesthetic terminology. The distinction has been well captured by Alan Goldman, a prominent scholar in the field of Aesthetics:

> Realists about aesthetic properties emphasize agreements in judgments that ascribe them; anti-realists emphasize disagreements or differences in taste. It is not agreement or disagreement in itself that generates their positions, however, but the seemingly best explanations for such.[6]

Goldman explains that aesthetic *realists* account for the observed *agreement* among aesthetic attributions made by perceivers as due to the fact that aesthetic attributes reflect real properties of objects, such that the dancer really is graceful. At the same time, *anti-realists* about aesthetic properties attempt to explain this agreement among aesthetic attributions by the notion of shared sensibilities, tastes, and common training or upbringing. Anti-realists deny that evidence of agreement among aesthetic attributions or judgments supports aesthetic property realism, because they claim that we would observe even more regular agreement among perceivers than we already do. In explaining *disagreement* among our aesthetic judgments or attributions, realists then attribute variation in aesthetic judgments to perceptual errors, such as lack of sensitivity, inattention, etc. Meanwhile, anti-realists explain disagreement (even among ideal critics) as evidence of irreconcilable differences in taste, evidencing that there really is no correct or incorrect standard to hold against the aesthetic attributions that we make.

In addition to this difference between the realists and anti-realists concerning their respective interpretations of the agreement and disagreement in our aesthetic attributions, they also differ in how they describe exactly what causes our aesthetic experiences. Anti-realists argue that our aesthetic experiences are caused by nothing more than various combinations of non-aesthetic perceptual properties of objects coupled with diverse perceiver psychologies.

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[6] See Goldman's "Realism About Aesthetic Properties," p. 31.

Importantly, anti-realists claim that there is no need to posit aesthetic properties, since they say that the entire story of our aesthetic experience can be accounted for by the way we react to ordinary perceptual properties. By contrast, realists claim that our aesthetic experiences are caused by real aesthetic properties in objects. Although these properties in a sense are thought of as emerging from non-aesthetic properties, they are meant to constitute some sort of uniquely aesthetic content that cannot be captured merely by sets of non-aesthetic properties.

Jerrold Levinson has proposed one of the most plausible defenses of aesthetic property realism, so if aesthetic realism stands a chance of combating the anti-realists, his is a substantial version to consider. [7] Levinson argues for the existence of two kinds of aesthetic properties:

(i)   Response-dependent (or dispositional)[8] aesthetic properties

(ii)   Non-response-dependent aesthetic properties (what he calls 'ways of appearing')

These two kinds of aesthetic properties correspond to what I shall call Levinson's *weak claim* and *bold claim*, respectively. In light of this, I make the following definitions:

> *Weak claim*: At least some aesthetic properties are real properties of objects insofar as their aesthetic character is due to their higher-order ways of appearing, and they exist in an emotionally relational manner to ideal perceivers as response-dependent properties.

> *Bold claim*: At least some aesthetic properties are real properties of objects insofar as they are characterized by higher-order ways of appearing.

I will first present an overview of his position in Chapter 2, attempting to explicate the central tenets of his theory. In Chapter 3, I will consider some problems with his weak and bold realist claims, discuss several findings from research in cognitive neuroscience that bear on the plausibility of his theory, and finally address some concerns raised by the philosopher Derek

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[7] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 315-335; Levinson's "Being Realistic About Aesthetic Properties," p. 351-552; and Levinson's "What Are Aesthetic Properties," p. 211-227.

[8] Levinson actually employs the terms 'response-dependence' and 'dispositional' interchangeably in his discussion of aesthetic properties, to the extent that if he does intend a distinction of meaning between these terms, he fails to clarify what it would be.

Matravers. The latter offers an ideal comparison point with Levinson because he also takes a dispositional view towards aesthetic properties, yet diverges from the latter by arguing that they do not constitute real properties because they lack any uniquely aesthetic content. Because Matravers' theory bases aesthetic attributions on experiences of non-aesthetic dispositional properties, his position is particularly helpful in illuminating the proximity between my ultimate reading of Levinson and such an anti-realist view. In Chapter 4, I will briefly summarize my findings and discuss how Levinson's position can be seen as a close approximation to an anti-realists dispositional view of aesthetic properties.

Before beginning to discuss Levinson's position, it will be helpful to clarify the meaning of a few additional terms. Both realists and anti-realists employ the phrase 'aesthetic property' in their debate. This is not a contradiction for the anti-realists, even though they do not believe that aesthetic properties really exist in the world. Thus, for the purposes of our discussion, it will be helpful to interpret the term 'property', when it appears, as referring roughly to the relevant features we attribute to objects *within our phenomenal experience*, being careful to avoid definitively positing anything further than that, such as independent metaphysical status, since to do so would be to presuppose the matter of inquiry at hand.

I should also say something preliminary about the term 'normative' with regard to the present topic. Aesthetic attributions or judgments are frequently regarded as exhibiting 'normativity' insofar as in calling something beautiful, it is commonly recognized by scholars that we are expressing more than merely a matter of personal like or dislike; the implication is that others *ought* to see that feature too and appreciate it. In Kantian terms, this refers to the distinction between 'judgments of agreeableness' and 'judgments of taste'. Both realists and anti-realists tend to accept that our aesthetic attributions reflect a normative character, even

though they differ in how they try to explain it. Thus, in my discussion here, 'normative' reflects the idea that we act as though there really were a correct or incorrect way to issue an aesthetic judgment. With these preliminaries aside, it is now time to examine the particulars of Levinson's position.

CHAPTER 2

LEVINSON'S REALISM

In the present chapter, I explain the content of Levinson's realist claims by first describing what motivates his position, followed by an examination of the central features of his account of the nature of aesthetic properties (i.e., if they were real, how or what would they be?). Concerning the latter topic, I will consider (1) Levinson's division of the content of an aesthetic attribution into descriptive and aesthetic components; (2) his formulation of a spectrum of response-dependency; (3) an explication of his notion of 'ways of appearing'; and (4) the additional arguments he provides to move from his weak realist claim to his bolder claim of the existence of non-response-dependent aesthetic properties. Throughout my discussion of Levinson's aesthetic realism, it will be important to keep in mind the interdependent relation of questions pertaining to the *nature* or *essence* of aesthetic properties and those pertaining to their *existence*.

Motivations for Levinson's Realism

To begin with, what motivates aesthetic property realism? Why should someone who accepts aesthetic *experiences* in subjects, and the evidence of some sort of causal relation of those experiences to non-aesthetic perceptual properties, posit aesthetic properties as real (in either a response-dependent manner or non-response-dependent manner)? In response to some objections raised by Derek Matravers, Levinson addresses this question, focusing on three issues: (1) the ability of aesthetic properties to account for the normativity (i.e. the presence of correctness conditions) implicitly attached to aesthetic attributions, and (2) the ability of

aesthetic properties to explain the nature of aesthetic experience, and (3) the ability of his version of realism to tell a coherent story in which an account of the metaphysics of aesthetic properties also sustains an associated description of their nature, including an explanation of how they relate to non-aesthetic properties. These issues motivate Levinson's position, because he believes that his version of aesthetic realism does a better job of addressing them than what could be said by an ant-realist.

Regarding the first aim, Levinson argues that it is not circular to assert both of the following statements simultaneously: (A) normativity is *explained by* the existence of aesthetic properties, and (B) normativity is a reason *to posit* the existence of aesthetic properties. Levinson explains:

> For if the positing of aesthetic properties is the upshot of something like an inference to the best explanation, so that an object's possessing an aesthetic property is the best explanation of a parallel attribution to the object's being correct, is not that sort of two-way relationship precisely what one should expect? For a realist, aesthetic attributions admit of being correct or incorrect because objects really do have or fail to have aesthetic properties; but equally, the socio-linguistic fact of there being correct and incorrect aesthetic attributions gives us grounds to posit corresponding properties in explanation of that fact. It remains only to suggest why aesthetic properties are the best such explanation available of the normativity in question. And that is because the only alternatives in sight are either the ensembles of non-aesthetic perceptible properties which, in conjunction with perceiver psychologies, cause aesthetic experiences, but no one has ever succeeded in elucidating how such indefinitely varying and cognitively unruly ensembles can serve to underwrite the normativity of aesthetic judgments; or else those aesthetic experiences themselves, but then unaccounted for is which experiences, or whose experiences, make for correctness of attributions.[9]

In other words, this passage contains two fundamentally significant claims – that aesthetic properties do explain the normativity invoked in statements involving aesthetic attributions, and that they offer the *best* explanation, given the alternatives. I shall address the plausibility of Levinson's claims in the forthcoming chapter, 'Objections to Levinson'.

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[9] Ibid., p. 214-215.

The second motivation for Levinson's aesthetic property realism concerns the purported fact that positing aesthetic properties manages to account for the aesthetic experiences we routinely have. He writes, "I maintain that on a higher-order way of appearing conception of them, aesthetic properties do in some sense serve to explain the generation of aesthetic experiences."[10] Further, when disagreement among aesthetic attributions does occur, Levinson attributes it to variations in degrees of perceivers' sensibilities.[11] He tries to accommodate this purported effect by suggesting that individuals can be classified according to perceptual sensibility groups, with certain groups more disposed to perceive certain types of aesthetic properties.

In attempting to fully appreciate the motivations for Levinson's realism, I shall subsequently devote significant energy to understanding the third issue - how he describes the nature or essence of aesthetic properties, particularly with regard to what is responsible for giving a term its aesthetic features, and in what this aesthetic content consists that can distinguish it from others sorts of perceptual content that falls short of being labeled 'aesthetic'.

Given these motivations, Levinson offers three specific arguments[12] in favor of the weak claim that the pure aesthetic content in what he regards as response-dependent aesthetic properties is constituted by the overall impression afforded or the perceptually manifest effect of a particular arrangement of lower order properties, rather than merely being identical or reducible to structural perceptual properties. The details of the first argument are best articulated in Levinson's words:

> First, one can often find alternative descriptions, sometimes requiring several words, of the distinctive experiential contents involved, in which the 'evaluation-added' element of the original attribution, if any, has been removed. For instance, one might approximate

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[10] Ibid., p. 215.
[11] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 331.
[12] Ibid., p. 318-320.

the descriptive content of 'gaudy' by 'bright, non-harmonious, eye-catching color combinations'.[13]

In other words, Levinson argues that the descriptive content of an aesthetic attribution can be re-phrased using language that is non-evaluative. He elaborates on his second reason in the following passage:

> Second, one can often get disputing critics to focus on the common perceptual ground in their aesthetic responses. For instance, a critic might be brought to admit that he is aware of the look or appearance another critic has remarked on with evident relish, reserving his right to dislike it, that is, to exercise his taste in the sense of personal preference with regard to it.[14]

Here, Levinson emphasizes that even critics who differ in their evaluative reactions can still find common perceptual features in an object on which to make concordant descriptive attributions.

Finally, there is the description of his third point:

> Thirdly, unless one assumes there are core aesthetic impressions of a qualitative sort, distinguishable from reactions of approval or disapproval per se, it becomes difficult to explain what competent critics with evaluative differences of opinion really could be talking about. Surely it's not just that one approves a certain arrangement of lines and colors, or pitches and rhythms, or words and phrases, and the other not. Rather more likely is that each registers the overall effect of the arrangement in question, that there are descriptions, reasonably neutral ones, they could even agree upon to characterize it, but that one favors it and the other does not, or one thinks it makes the work good and the other does not. In addition, failing to acknowledge distinctive aesthetic impressions as the core descriptive content of common aesthetic attributions makes a mystery out of what the aesthetic experiences of perceivers of any sort could possibly consist in.[15]

This point amounts to the claim that if there were no uniquely aesthetic content, it would be unclear what the content of the judgments made by ideal critics would be about.

Before evaluating the plausibility of each of these reasons in the forthcoming chapter, there is one additional aspect of Levinson's theory that he establishes in articulating his

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[13] Ibid., p. 318.
[14] Ibid., p. 318.
[15] Ibid., p. 318-319.

motivations for his weak claim, which also applies to his bold claim. It concerns the notions of

an ideal perceiver and perceptual sensibility groups. Regarding the first term, Levinson writes,

> Insofar as an aesthetic attribution is intended as objective, that is, as the attribution of a property of intersubjective import, such looks or impressions or appearances are relativized to a perceiver who views a work correctly, and thus approaches the condition of what has been called, following Hume, a true critic or ideal judge.[16]

It is thus important to note that response-dependent aesthetic properties are recognized,

according to Levinson, by such ideal perceivers who understand how to properly contextualize

aesthetic objects. This feature of Levinson's theory is intended to function as a defense against

anti-realists who emphasize that even ideal critics can disagree among their aesthetic attributions.

By positing the notion of an ideal perceiver, Levinson offers an explanation of instances where

lay perceivers fail to "properly" execute aesthetic judgments.

Further, the notion of perceiver sensibility groups is meant to perform a similar function

in Levinson's theory:

> At any rate, in order to begin to come to terms with the implications of sensibility diversity for aesthetic realism we need to look at what sensibilities in this context might consist in. We should at the outset recognize the possibility not only of a diversity of sensibilities, but of a diversity of *kinds* of sensibility.[17]

Levinson suggests that sensibility groups could be drawn not only according to differences in

perceptual sensibility (i.e. "a disposition to receive phenomenal impressions of certain sorts from

various constellations of perceivable non-aesthetic features"), but also differences in attitudinal

sensibility (i.e. "a disposition to react to phenomenal impressions of certain sorts with attitudes

of favor or disfavor"). Cases of aesthetic disagreement could then be matters of either variation

in perceptual sensibility grouping, attitudinal sensibility grouping, or some combination of both.

The main function of positing different types of sensibility groups is that if one accepts the

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[16] Ibid., p. 315-316.
[17] Ibid., p. 330-331.

possibility of separating evaluative from descriptive content, then Levinson argues that the descriptive elements of the aesthetic attributions of ideal perceivers ought to exhibit clearer evidence of convergence. Further, Levinson claims that aesthetic judgments made by ideal perceivers within one's own sensibility group will carry more weight for individuals of that same grouping than attributions made by ideal perceivers in other sensibility groups.

<u>Evaluative and Descriptive Content</u>

Having considered the main arguments leading Levinson to his realist position, it is possible now to more closely identify the aspects of his theory that contribute to his characterization of the *nature* of aesthetic properties as having real aesthetic content. In other words, what would the contents of an aesthetic property be, if it were real? Levinson's answer to this question includes his discussion of descriptive and evaluative content, response and non-response-dependent criteria, and a complex theory of ways of appearing and dispositions. I shall address each of these in turn.

Levinson believes that aesthetic properties (certain looks, impressions, appearances) somehow emerge from particular arrangements of non-aesthetic perceptual content. When someone says something like "that painting is balanced", he is claiming that the term 'balanced' refers to the aesthetic property 'balance' instantiated by the object, which amounts to the "higher-order ways of appearing, dependent in systematic fashion on lower-order ways of appearing but not conceptually tied to them or inferable from them."[18] He offers the example of how the delicacy of a sculpture relies on the sculpture's textures, dimensions, material, etc., but not vice versa. As in the case of 'balanced', as already noted, Levinson claims that the

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[18] See Levinson's "Aesthetic properties," p. 218.

phenomenal[19] impression experienced by the perceiver actually reflects a real (i.e. non-relational) property of balance instantiated in the painting.

Granted this, Levinson argues that most aesthetic attributions entail a significant *descriptive* component, meaning that he construes the occurrence of certain looks, impressions, or appearances, emerging out of lower order perceptual properties, as objective (in either a response-dependent or non-response-dependent manner).[20] The label *descriptive* refers to the fact that they can simply be described on the basis of perceptual observation, and therefore importantly cannot "be applied to just anything".[21] Further, the name is meant to suggest a distinction to *evaluative* content, the latter of which Levinson wants to say is not a sort of content that results from direct perceptual observation alone. By 'lower order perceptual properties', Levinson has in mind structural or physical perceptual properties like shapes, textures, pitches, rhythms, etc. He also includes colors in this category, despite the complexity of scholarly debates on their ontological role as secondary qualities. He offers a number of aesthetic terms that are meant to entail aesthetic descriptive content:

> There are, for instance, formal terms, e.g. 'balanced', 'chaotic', 'unified'; expressive ones, e.g. 'melancholy', 'anguished', 'cheerful'; metaphorical but non-psychological ones, e.g. 'delicate', 'steely', 'brittle'; and natively aesthetic ones, e.g. 'graceful', 'gaudy', 'garish'.[22]

Levinson also recognizes that many aesthetic attributions also contain *evaluative* content in addition to their descriptive content, leading him to regard a majority of aesthetic terms as of a "mixed-character". Here, *evaluative* is intended to refer to the notion that a subject asserts an approving or disapproving attitude toward the object of perception, or attributes a certain

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[19] Levinson acknowledges that his argument relies on the vital assumption that qualia could potentially directly reveal features of the physical world, such that our phenomenal impressions really do represent how the world is. As the debate on the nature of qualia is an extensive one, we shall accept this assumption for the purposes of our discussion.

[20] Ibid., p. 315.

[21] Ibid, p. 316.

[22] Ibid., p. 316.

aesthetic value or disvalue to it. Levinson also allows that some terms are completely evaluative, such as words like 'striking', 'splendid', or 'excellent'.[23] Unlike mixed-character terms, these completely evaluative words purportedly lack any descriptive content, "meaning that they do not imply anything about the kind, category, or nature of the object to which they are applied".[24]

The degree of evaluative content thus seems to play the key role in determining where on the realism spectrum Levinson places a property, such that terms that he regards as completely evaluative would be considered response-dependent properties. Nevertheless, this trend does not warrant a complete conflation of the terms 'response-dependence' with 'evaluative', even if both concepts in his theory entail some sort of emotional reaction. It would seem that the primary difference between them is that Levinson's notion of response-dependence involves reactions of feelings, while his notion of evaluative entails more of an attitudinal/cognitive approval or disapproval. Thus, we could explain the correlation between aesthetic terms that are both purely evaluative and response-dependent by suggesting that Levinson intended in his theory to first acknowledge a perceiver's emotional response (such as one of pleasure) to a particular aesthetic appearance, followed by a distinct phase in which that person would either approve or disapprove of the aesthetic impression that was constituted by a feeling combined with a way of appearing. In this way we can think of Levinson's notions of response-dependence and evaluative as related but separate.

Contrary to anti-realist opponents like Alan Goldman, Levinson believes that the occurrence of evaluative content within aesthetic terms presents no obstacle to their objectivity, since it should be possible to separate the evaluative from descriptive content so as to permit the latter to function as justification for the normative aspect of our aesthetic judgments. Levinson

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[23] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 316.
[24] Ibid., p. 316.

attempts to illustrate this point by explaining how the term 'gaudy' can refer to descriptive

elements of an artwork independently of whether a viewer approves or disapproves of the

gaudiness present. He then concludes, "This suggests that the essence of gaudiness is not a

judgment of disapprobation on the speaker's part but instead a kind of appearance: a perceptually

manifest effect one can register independently of any evaluative assessment of or attitudinal

reaction to that effect."[25] In addition to this claim, he argues that removing any evaluative

component of 'gaudy' does not affect its semantic content.

The Response-Dependency Spectrum

Levinson defines response-dependence as there being either (1) a distinctive sort of

response had by perceivers to objects possessing the property, or (2) an a priori connection

between the possession of the property by an object and the having of distinctive responses by

perceivers.[26] He argues that reactions of pleasure or displeasure to the associated perceived looks

of these are essential to what these properties are, hence their response-dependence. Levinson

explains,

> Consider facial loveliness, a property of course relative to human sensibility, and perhaps
> also to a specific ethnic or cultural sensibility. That property seems plausibly analyzed in
> terms of the affording of a distinctive sort of pleasurable feeling, one tinged with desire,
> had in perceiving the basic visual features of the face…Insofar as sublimity, musical
> tension, facial loveliness, and bodily sexiness demand analysis on an object-or-form-
> perceived-with-feeling-model, they are clearly response-dependent properties, and not
> comfortably accountable manifest ways of appearing.[27]

This passage reveals an important aspect of how Levinson regards response-dependence. In the

original conditions he specified for the term, Levinson described the general notion of a

distinctive sort of response, leaving the exact sort of response as unspecified. However, in the

above passage, he restricts the notion of response-dependence to reactions involving *emotions* or

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[25] Ibid, p. 317.
[26] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 223.
[27] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 224-225.

feelings. This is an important specification, since it restricts the sort of reaction that Levinson considers to be constituted by a response-dependent relationship.

Although Levinson is very much concerned in his theory with looks or ways of appearing, he does not explicitly consider these to be additional types of reactions to perceptual stimuli. While gestalt theorists may regard the overall impression that perceivers impose on objects as types of response-dependent reactions, Levinson does not. Rather, he regards ways of appearing or looks as simply there. Evidence of this can be seen by the fact that his classification of non-response-dependent properties constitutes a descriptive aesthetic content that is simply higher-order ways of appearing. More will be said on this subsequently, but for now it is just important to note that Levinson's concept of response-dependence does seem to be restricted mainly to reactions of feelings had while contemplating an object, hence the phrase he coins in the quotation above - 'form-perceived-with-feeling'.

Levinson believes that there is a spectrum along which his terminology for aesthetic properties can be classified as real. At one end of this are what he recognizes as "clearly response-dependent properties", which are denoted by terms such as 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'dumpy', 'tense'. At the other end of the spectrum lie what Levinson refers to as "non-response-dependent aesthetic properties", which include what are often called *formal* (e.g. 'balanced', 'unified', 'dynamic', 'fluid') and *stylistic* ('impressionist', 'futurist') aesthetic properties. Both, according to Levinson, are associated with the overall way that certain configurations look, "visual looks of a higher-order," as in "characteristic visual appearances, accessible to sight, rather than propensities to induce distinctive feelings accessible to introspection." [28] It should be noted, though, that Levinson seems to regards both response-dependent aesthetic properties and non-

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[28] Ibid., p.224.

response-dependent aesthetic properties as equally real, and differing not in ontological status, but only in the degree of their response-dependency.

As noted above, what makes these properties non-response-dependent is the very absence of associated feelings experienced in conjunction with contemplation of the overall phenomenal impression. In considering the example 'balanced', for instance, Levinson argues that there is unlikely any feeling associated with contemplating something that appears so. Rather, the subject's aesthetic focus is on the object's perceivable form, which Levinson believes is perceived directly, such that he wants to claim that a subject's experience of an aesthetic impression actually directly represents the aesthetic property itself of the object. However, somewhat counter-intuitively, Levinson does not explicitly regard the sensation of the overall impression as a sort of reaction. I will elaborate further on this issue shortly.

Levinson classifies the properties referenced by *expressive* terms, such as 'tender', 'hesitant', 'cheerful', 'confident', 'sad', etc., with less conviction than those he regards as 'clearly response-dependent' and 'non-response-dependent'. He writes,

> Are these expressive properties straightforwardly audible ways of appearing belonging to the music, or are they partly a matter of how we standardly feel when we hear the music's more basic audible features of melody, rhythm, harmony and so on? I am inclined to hold the former position, though not, I confess, with the utmost confidence.[29]

Finally, Levinson considers how to classify such terms as 'graceful' and 'garish'. He believes that it remains unclear whether it is best to regard these as non-response-dependent or as response-dependent properties. The latter would be true if "the distinctive sorts of pleasant and unpleasant feelings those properties occasion are held to enter into what those properties are, so that for something to be graceful or garish is in part for it to occasion such feelings in relevant perceivers, then gracefulness and garishness cannot be understood as straightforward ways of

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[29] Ibid., p.225.

appearing."[30] The problem lies in the difficulty in determining if this is actually the case or not. On the other hand, Levinson believes evidence for their non-response-dependence could be given if it could be shown that the associated feelings were not essential to the properties, but "instead only concomitants of the perception of those objects and the higher-order ways they appear…"[31]

It is worth mentioning that in an earlier paper of Levinson's[32], written in 2001, he did not take such a bold stance on the existence of non-response-dependent aesthetic properties. Rather, he offered many similar descriptions of the nature of aesthetic properties, but then concluded that his statements could only support a response-dependent view of aesthetic properties. For instance, in the 2001 essay, he explains the objective component of aesthetic properties by their relation to those who view an object correctly:

> Insofar as an aesthetic attribution is intended as objective, that is, as the attribution of a property of inter-subjective import, such looks or impressions or appearances are relativized to a perceiver who views a work correctly, and thus approaches the condition of what has been called, following Hume, a true critic or ideal judge.[33]

Later in the same paper, he adds, "Thus the existence of certain aesthetic properties – roughly, the dispositions to afford such impressions or appearances – can hardly be denied…"[34] Such statements indicate clear allegiance to a view of aesthetic properties as real *only* insofar as they cause certain perceivers to experience certain aesthetic impressions. In that case, only an appropriately positioned perceiver, that is, someone with a cultivated sensibility and normal perceptual capacity, would correctly label a particular painting 'balanced'. However, in a paper

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[30] Ibid., p.226.
[31] Ibid., p. 226.
[32] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 315-335. Although the original version of this paper did appear in 2001, I shall be referring to the copy printed in Levinson's book "Contemplating Art", which was published in 2006.
[33] Ibid., p. 315-316.
[34] Ibid., p. 320.

from 2005[35], Levinson takes a notably bolder stance on the matter, adopting the realist

dispositional position for only *some* aesthetic properties:

> So, are aesthetic properties more akin to manifest sensible properties, like colors and
> timbres, which are at least arguably non-response-dependent, or to perceiver-
> dispositional properties like nauseatingness or infuriatingness, which are unmistakably
> response-dependent? Are aesthetic properties fundamentally a matter of how things look
> and sound, or are they a matter of how perceiving those things, or their lower-order looks
> and sounds, makes us feel? Perhaps the truth is this. Some aesthetic properties really are
> essentially looks and sounds, explicable apart from feelings such looks and sounds may
> engender in perceivers, and thus higher-order ways of appearing. But some are not. The
> latter sort of aesthetic property is instead to be analyzed on a form-perceived-with-feeling
> model, and thus as inescapably response-dependent.[36]

Here Levinson argues for *both* the weaker and more robust forms of aesthetic realism. He

believes that response-dependent aesthetic properties exist, but he also boldly argues for the

existence of non-response-dependent properties in objects.

More on Ways of Appearing

Before further considering how Levinson's arguments progress from the weak to the bold

claim, it should be helpful to further clarify the fundamental notion of 'ways of appearing' that

underscores his realism. Revisiting our earlier discussion, how is it then that calling a painting

'balanced' or 'cheerful' could entail reference to more than just a positive reaction of approval?

It may seem counter-intuitive, and even nearly incoherent, to consider placing the uniquely

aesthetic content attributed by aesthetic judgments among non-evaluative features of objects of

our perception. This issue reveals the significance of Levinson's version of realism, for he

creatively claims that the criteria for being 'aesthetic' actually lie in the *way* that the descriptive

components of our impressions appear. He attempts to do this by distinguishing between 'lower-

order perceptual properties' and 'higher-order perceptual properties', the latter of which are

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[35] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 211-227.
[36] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 223.

meant to depend "in an asymmetric fashion, on other ways of appearing, which can on that account be labeled lower order ones"[37], while still being directly perceivable (i.e. 'manifest').

Levinson describes this purely aesthetic content as the "overall impression afforded"[38], as "a perceptually manifest effect that one can register independently of any evaluative reaction."[39] Again, it is important to recognize the distinction that Levinson wants to make here between (1) the non-evaluative overall impression afforded by the purely descriptive content, and (2) the emotional response that occurs in some aesthetic experiences which leads Levinson to label some aesthetic properties as response-dependent. In other words, Levinson writes of the notion of 'response-dependence' only in conjunction with a sort of emotional reaction had upon experiencing a particular aesthetic content. The fact that that content has to do with the overall impression afforded, however, has nothing to do with whether or not a property is characterized as response-dependent. Instead, the 'way of appearing' or 'overall impression' contributes to Levinson's notion of 'descriptive content', whose significance lies in establishing the fact that the property really does contain some sort of uniquely aesthetic content not reducible to some collection of non-aesthetic perceptual properties. Recognizing to some extent the complexity of these notions, Levinson elaborates on his position:

> What exactly does the descriptive component of an aesthetic property consist in? Is it in fact a unitary impression – a look or appearance – that an object is fitted to afford, as I have argued, or is it rather a plurality of combinations of non-aesthetic features that an object might possess? Call the former the *phenomenological* account of aesthetic properties and the latter the *structural* account… What argues above all for the phenomenological conception is its comporting better with the evident semantics of aesthetic attributions: when we ascribe an aesthetic property it seems that what we are ascribing, at base, is an emergent way of appearing, and not a range of ensembles of disparate traits that, it so happens, sustain a way of appearing.[40]

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[37] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 219.
[38] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 318.
[39] Ibid, p. 317.
[40] Ibid., p. 322-323.

What does all this jargon amount to? Well, it would seem that by drawing a distinction within the descriptive content of our representations between higher and lower order perceptual properties, Levinson is striving to find a way to separate the evaluative subjective judgments from our concept of the aesthetic, so as to justify its objectivity, and he is trying to do so in a way that precludes the anti-realists from reducing aesthetic content to mere non-aesthetic physical properties, so as to be able to say that aesthetic properties are real and objective.

One challenge to Levinson's fundamental distinction here is the feasibility of understanding any actual difference between the phenomenological and structural accounts. He describes both as entailing *ways of appearing*[41], which granted Levinson's recognition of the approximate equivalence of 'ways of appearing' and 'manifest properties' (i.e., "properties that reveal their natures in and through their appearances"[42]) is reasonable in itself, yet leads to confusion when attempting to distinguish these terms. Elsewhere, Levinson adds that "something unitary of a perceptual sort remains constant throughout varying attitudes toward the impressions", and that this "effect of the arrangement in the object" – *its way of appearing* – is what constitutes its purely aesthetic higher perceptual character.[43] The main distinction thus seems to turn on whether the way of appearing involves a *unified* phenomenal impression (phenomenological) or a range of *disparate* traits yielding apparently some sort of less unified phenomenal impression (structural). He associates the former with an *emergent* or *holistic* way of appearing, and the latter with merely *sustaining* a way of appearing. Although it is tempting to interpret both of these alternatives as potentially offering holistic impressions, Levinson seems to

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[41] Let us note that he regards a 'way of appearing' as a mode or way of being. See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 217 for a discussion of this.
[42] Ibid., p. 217.
[43] Ibid., p. 217-220.

want to emphasize that the phenomenological account has a certain special impressional quality

to it lacking in the structural account.

Frank Sibley, one of the original proponents of aesthetic realism, offers a clarification of

the distinction between aesthetic and structural properties by writing that it is the difference

between seeing that something is 'graceful' (an aesthetic quality) versus seeing that it is 'red' (a

structural perceptual property).[44] Levinson offers several examples in attempt to further

illuminate the difference:

> For an illustrative example, I turn to the expressive properties of Tchaikovsky's symphonies, a topic
> broached by Goldman himself. One can register the exuberant, bumptious quality of the principal tune of
> the finale of the Fourth Symphony, and even its suggestion of an overexcited, unselfconscious individual,
> independently of whether that quality, or the way the music embodies it, is to one's taste (in the sense of
> aesthetic preference) … Throughout, though, there is an aesthetic quality that I ascribe mentally to the
> music, a quality not reducible to the particular timbres, rhythms, harmonies, and loudnesses on which it is
> based, and one I hear as what it is regardless of my current attitude toward it…[45]

His description of listening to Franck's Piano Quintet is even more revealing:

> The distraught, even overheated, longing of the first movement's chromatic second theme, built on a
> repeated four note figure, is recognized by anyone versed in the late-Romantic idiom and the norms of
> chamber music generally…This longing quality is not identical with that of any structural properties per se,
> on which, however, it clearly rests, but is instead a higher-order perceptual property logically tied to a
> particular sort of impression, one standardly afforded perceivers with the appropriate musical experience
> and appreciative background.[46]

These examples help to demonstrate a qualitative difference between both types of ways

of appearing mentioned by Levinson. In the case of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, the

particular loudness, rhythm, chords played, and other structural aspects of the music each have

their own way of being perceived, but once one considers the overall impression that these

features create, it would seem that the focus would need to shift to more of a holistic gestalt-type

way of appearing. Perhaps this is what Levinson's distinction is getting at. By distinguishing

between 'lower-order way of appearing' and 'higher-order way of appearing', Levinson is really

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[44] See Sibley, "Objectivity and Aesthetics," p. 33.
[45] See Levinson's, "Being Realistic About Aesthetic Properties", p. 353.
[46] Ibid, p. 353.

saying that there are two qualitatively distinct kinds of 'way of appearing' – one of a structural

discrete way, and another of a holistic way. This would make better sense of the way that he

equates the terms 'way of appearing' and 'phenomenal impression'[47], especially given that it

would seem rather odd to argue that structural properties do not cause any sort of phenomenal

impressions in perceivers. One can see that Levinson's terminology is somewhat misleading

though once one realizes how subtly distinct these ways are.

<u>Arguments for the Bold Claim</u>

The distinguishing evidence that Levinson gives for his weak and bold forms of realism

is extremely subtle and implicit to how he regards ways of appearing, dispositions, response-

dependence traits, objects, properties, and the role of perceivers. Here I shall be primarily

concerned with extracting the exact statements that can be used to support the bolder claim that

at least some aesthetic properties are non-response-dependent.

The first significant section of Levinson's 2005 paper contains a discussion of the

essence of a property:

> Understood as ways of being, properties are thus closely related as possibilities, in that if
> it is possible for an object to be a certain way W, then there exists a property, being W.
> But that should not lead one to think that properties are merely possibilia. Properties are
> realia, though abstract ones. A property exists, or is actual, insofar as it is possible for
> things to be corresponding ways.[48]

Now this passage essentially offers a grounding point for the forthcoming theory that Levinson is

about to build about the possibility that objects could have ways of being without having anyone

to perceive them. His bold claim relies on a shift of attention from the experience of the

perceiver (as emphasized in his discussion of response-dependent properties) to the actual

features of the object itself. The statement "if it is possible for an object to be a certain way W,

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[47] See Levinson's, "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 320.
[48] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 217.

then there exists a property, being W" is fundamentally crucial to the outlook that motivates

Levinson's bold claim, for it relies on the idea that a property is essentially a way of being, and

that that notion intrinsically need not imply anything about the presence of a perceiver.

> In Levinson's discussion of the notion of 'ways of appearing', he writes,

> Ways of appearing are, first, ways of appearing *to perceivers of a certain sort*; and second, ways of appearing *in certain conditions*. They are thus implicitly perceiver-relative and condition-relative. The first implicit relativity reflects the fact that given ways of appearing do not manifest themselves to all sentient creatures, but only those with an appropriate sensory-perceptual-cognitive apparatus… The second implicit relativity reflects the fact that given ways of appearing do not manifest themselves in all circumstances, but only those conducive to such manifestation…Thirdly, although this is not a relativity but rather a specification, ways of appearing are always ways of appearing *in some modality*, such as visual, or aural or tactile. The upshot of an interaction between a perceiver, an object, and one of its appearance properties, or ways of appearing, is an event, what one can call an *appearing*. And a subject S's perceiving an object O's way of appearing W can be equated with S's being appeared to in way W by O. But none of that is to say, however, that there are appearances, in the sense of introspectible mental things, existing within the mind.[49]

This passage taken in isolation would seem to only offer clear support for the existence of

response-dependent aesthetic properties, given Levinson's description of the relativity of ways of

appearing. However, later in the same paper, he argues that a way of appearing is not equivalent

to having a disposition to appear that particular way.[50] The reasons he gives for the

nonequivalence of perceptible properties with dispositional properties are:

> (1) ways of appearing are clearly manifest properties, ones we directly perceive, whereas dispositions, even dispositions to afford appearances, being inescapably relational properties, are not. A thing's disposition or power to cause effects or induce changes cannot be directly perceived, but only inferred from those effects or changes.
> (2) something can possess a way-of-appearing without in fact having the disposition to appear that way to relevant observers, due to the extraordinary circumstances of the thing in question.
> (3) the concept of a way of appearing does not include anything about conditions of observation or types of observers, though it is true that in order to properly judge of a given way of appearing,…, the conditions of observation have to be apt, and you have to be an apt sort of observer. Which is to say that such properties are inherently

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[49] Ibid., p. 217-218.
[50] Ibid., p. 219-220.

indexed to such parameters or implicitly relative to them… But that does not mean that such parameters figure in the concept of the way of appearing itself, that which is both directly perceived and ascribed to the object that presents it.[51]

Recall also that Levinson believes that a way of appearing is often not identified with a perceiver's having a particular feeling in looking at an object (Levinson only regards it as otherwise in cases of aesthetic terms which he labels 'entirely evaluative', which thus lack any descriptive content). If it were, he recognizes that the feeling afforded by the object would have to be recognized as a component of the way of appearing itself. Rather, Levinson believes that at least some higher-order ways of appearing are distinct from their respective object's capacity to induce feelings in perceivers, since he regards ways of appearing not as reactions but as manifest appearances.[52] This goes back to his belief in the possibility of separating descriptive from evaluative content in an aesthetic impression. I shall assess the cogency of these points later in the chapter 'Objections to Levinson', but for now it suffices to note their role for Levinson in distinguishing ways of appearing from dispositions.

Next, Levinson employs this notion of ways of appearing to show how it explains aesthetic experience. His argument is obscure in that he does not explicitly state that this constitutes evidence for the existence of non-response-dependent aesthetic properties rather than for response-dependent ones, but it can be read as implied:

> We can explain someone experiencing a dancer's movement as graceful by appealing to the fact that the movement really *has* the way of appearing graceful, the conditions being *right* for such a way of appearing to manifest itself, and the person's being an *apt* subject for that way of appearing, that is, the sort of subject to which that way of appearing is implicitly relative… Such explanations at least seem to be ordinary causal explanations.[53]

If this passage were intended as evidence for the existence of solely response-dependent aesthetic properties, Levinson would likely not have written that "the movement really has the

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[51] Ibid., p. 219-220.
[52] Ibid., p. 222-223.
[53] Ibid., p. 220.

way of appearing graceful", and should have instead emphasized the inseparability of this feature

of the movement with the perceptual conditions and aptness of the perceiver. Nevertheless, since

he wrote similar passages in his 2001 essay which aimed solely to support the existence of

response-dependent aesthetic properties, this passage alone is not sufficient to distinguish the

evidence he offers for his two realist claims. The following paragraph in his 2005 essay,

however, provides a helpful additional step:

> However, in order for them to really be so, it would have to be a *contingent* matter that apt subjects for a way of appearing W in apt conditions experience objects possessing W as W. For if that were instead an *a priori* matter, then the ostensible causal explanations involved would not be genuine ones, since the explanandum and explananda would be necessarily linked. According to Mark Johnston, however, where perceptible properties such as colours are concerned, these sorts of explanations are indeed genuine, since it can be shown to be only contingent that standard subjects for a given such colour property P, and in standard conditions for perceiving P, perceive an object having P as P.[54]

Levinson's aim here is to show how a non-dispositional conception of aesthetic properties (i.e. as

manifest properties or higher-order ways of appearing "to which certain classes of perceivers are

receptive") can offer a causal explanation of our aesthetic experience. In other words, such an

explanation would demonstrate that our experience of a dancer's movement as being graceful is

due to the movement actually being graceful, insofar as it possesses a non-dispositional graceful

way of appearing. According to Levinson, this fact would need to be *contingent* rather than a

priori, since that is the only way it could function as a true explanation of events.

Given this purported causal function of at least some aesthetic properties, in a contingent

rather than a priori manner, Levinson concludes that some aesthetic properties are non-response-

dependent, since according to his description, they are more closely aligned to manifest

perceptual properties ("fundamentally a matter of how things look or sound") rather than

dispositional properties ("a matter of how perceiving them, or their lower-order looks and

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[54] Ibid., p. 221.

sounds, makes us feel").[55] Recall, Levinson's definition of a response-dependent property is twofold[56]:

> (1) The concept involves the idea of a distinctive sort of response had by perceivers to objects possessing the property.
> (2) There is an a priori connection between the possession of the property by an object and the having of distinctive responses by perceivers.

Given these definitions, Levinson has already argued against the possibility of either, so he concludes that the alternative of aesthetic properties in being akin to manifest perceptual properties must be true in certain cases. This claim amounts to the assertion that some aesthetic properties "really are essentially looks and sounds, explicable apart from feelings such looks and sounds may engender in perceivers, and thus higher-order ways of appearing."[57]

As mentioned earlier in our discussion of Levinson's realism, graceful is one example of which Levinson is unsure how to classify. His argument remains open on this point:

> The pleasant and unpleasant feelings commonly had on viewing graceful and garish objects may not be essential to those properties, but instead only concomitants of the perception of those objects and the higher-order ways they appear, such ways of appearing being graspable apart from the feelings that commonly result from their being perceived.[58]

At this point, I have concluded my presentation of the main evidence that Levinson offers in support of both of his realist claims, as well as his descriptive theory of the nature of aesthetic properties and how this relates to their metaphysics. It is now time to consider a range of objections to his positions.

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[55] Ibid., p. 223.
[56] Ibid., p. 223.
[57] Ibid., p. 223.
[58] Ibid., p. 226.

CHAPTER 3

OBJECTIONS TO LEVINSON

In order to broadly assess the plausibility and cogency of Levinson's realist claims, I shall divide the objections that we evaluate into four sections here. First, I consider the arguments that Levinson provides to motivate his realism. Second, I examine certain findings from neuroscience research to reveal a range of flaws in his evidence for his weak realist claim. Third, I critique his arguments for his bold realist claim. Finally, I shall consider concerns raised by Derek Matravers concerning how well Levinson's position fares against the former's own anti-realism with regards to the overarching issues of the normativity of aesthetic attributions, in addition to related matters concerning explanation of aesthetic experience.

Against Levinson's Realist Motivations

I first consider here the plausibility of the arguments that Levinson provided to support the motivations for his aesthetic realism. Recall that his reasons entailed: (1) the existence of alternative phrasing of descriptive aesthetic content, (2) critics with opposing evaluative reactions can still agree on common perceptual features, and (3) the need for the existence of some aesthetic content on which the judgments of critics can be based. Positing a uniquely aesthetic descriptive content is important for Levinson, because it is that feature which is responsible for making aesthetic properties real.

The problem with Levinson's first piece of support is that his attempts to re-cast aesthetic phrases do not necessarily eliminate the role of evaluative terms. Indeed, aesthetic attributions can be rephrased into other words, as in the substitution of the potentially evaluatively loaded

aesthetic term 'gaudy' by other terms like 'bright, non-harmonious, eye-catching color combinations'.[59] However, 'non-harmonious' and 'eye-catching' arguably both contain clear evaluative components, granted their respective definitions according to the American Heritage Dictionary – 'incongruity or failing to form a pleasingly consistent whole' and 'visually attracting attention'. It is unclear how one might reduce these words into purely objective, non-evaluative phrasing. What is non-harmonious to one person need not agree with what another person believes, unless it can be clearly established that aesthetic properties are indeed objective to some extent, or that what is pleasing or visually attracting can be captured by non-evaluative objective content. However, that is precisely the aim of Levinson's argument, so it hardly seems justified to rely on this assumption to prove his case. Thus, the existence of alternative phrasing of descriptive aesthetic content cannot constitute a reason for believing in the possibility of isolating purely descriptive aesthetic content uncontaminated by evaluative content, since the very idea of 'alternative phrasing' presupposes this outcome. So, Levinson has not offered much support for his position with this first point.

Regarding the second point - that critics who display opposing evaluative reactions can still agree on common perceptual features in objects - I must conclude that he is also unconvincing here, since the reasoning fails to account for why the common ground of critics' agreement could not be merely either (1) lower-order perceptual properties of a non-aesthetic nature, or alternatively, (2) that they could be response-dependent aesthetic properties but would still contain an irreducible evaluative component. If the first case were true, Levinson would be wrong in claiming that aesthetic properties were real in any sense, since they would not contain any uniquely aesthetic descriptive content. In the second case, Levinson's realism would also be

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[59] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 318.

threatened, but this time because it would not be possible to isolate any sort of content apart from

evaluations to justify the objectivity of aesthetic judgments.

> This will become more clear if by examining exactly what he writes,

> Second, one can often get disputing critics to focus on the common perceptual ground in their aesthetic responses. For instance, a critic might be brought to admit that he is aware of the look or appearance another critic has remarked on with evident relish, reserving his right to dislike it, that is, to exercise his taste in the sense of personal preference with regard to it.[60]

Then Levinson goes on to provide a musical example to illustrate his point:

> The opening of Bach's Concerto for Three Harpsichords and Strings in D minor, BWV 1063, offers a vivid expression of grimness; it might even be described as 'starkly grim'. Now, some competent listeners like grimness – like that character, like being confronted with it – and others do not. It is easy to imagine those latter folk simply labeling the opening 'depressingly dour' and having done with it, but it also seems more than likely that they could be brought to acknowledge the aptness of the characterization 'starkly grim' as well, only adding under their breaths, 'if you like that sort of thing'.[61]

On one hand, Levinson does make a partially reasonable point here. It is a potentially plausible

scenario that the quality 'grimness' could be something heard to which listeners respond with

either a positive or negative evaluative reaction. However, even if so, this does not preclude the

possibility that the way of sounding grim itself is not already somehow evaluative (in which case

there would be evaluations made about evaluative properties). The way of sounding grim could

already be evaluative if our approval/disapproval mechanisms enter into the representational

content of our experiences at the initial point in which we become aware of the structural content

of these representations.

This point raises the complex issue of whether or not our perceptual experience is already

necessarily conceptualized at the level of sensory input.[62] If one adopts the sort of position taken

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[60] Ibid., p. 318.
[61] Ibid., p. 318-319.
[62] John McDowell provides an interesting discussion of the issue of whether our impressions from the world already contain conceptual content in his book "Mind and World," Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1994). Clearly

by John McDowell that our sensibility (i.e. receptivity), although in direct contact with the world, already contains conceptual content, it would suggest a much more complicated story to tell for aesthetic realism concerning the interaction between evaluative and descriptive content within our core aesthetic impressions. Much of Levinson's entire realist position could be considered as turning on this point, depending on the extent to which one believes it is possible to separate evaluative from descriptive content. If one takes the perspective that our sensory impressions are already conceptualized, we would then have a scenario potentially involving concepts containing descriptive content and concepts containing evaluative content (since reactions of approval or disapproval would also be similarly already fundamentally conceptual, even as they respond immediately to sensory inputs).

In any case, it is very difficult to say how a definitive interpretation could be given one way or the other. Levinson's case, nevertheless, would be made significantly stronger if he had something to say about eliminating this possibility, especially given that it remains still unclear exactly what it would be like to have an aesthetic impression in which we could consciously make such a distinction between our awareness of, say, ways that arrangements appear and whether or not we like or dislike that arrangement. Thus, much skepticism remains concerning the plausibility of disputing critics being capable of focusing on common perceptual grounds in their aesthetic responses, since looks or appearances at least in practice seem to be so intertwined with evaluative reactions. While we may be capable of distinguishing a priori between the evaluative and descriptive content of our concepts, doing so in practice remains a potentially different matter. Who is to say whether or not our attribution of the term 'graceful' or 'balanced' actually has successfully distanced itself from our reactions of approval or disapproval?

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applying this discussion to the topic of the relation of descriptive and evaluative content in our aesthetic impressions is an immense and challenging topic, but one that might be quite interesting.

Levinson's third point also is inadequate. It can be summarized in the following passage:

> Thirdly, unless one assumes there are core aesthetic impressions of a qualitative sort, distinguishable from reactions of approval or disapproval per se, it becomes difficult to explain what competent critics with evaluative differences could really be talking about. Surely it's not just that one approves a certain arrangement of lines and colors, or pitches and rhythms, or words and phrases, and the other not. Rather more likely is that each registers the overall effect of the arrangement in question, that there are descriptions, reasonably neutral ones, they could even agree upon to characterize it, but that one favors it and the other does not, or one thinks it makes the work good and the other does not. In addition, failing to acknowledge distinctive aesthetic impressions as the core descriptive content of common aesthetic attributions makes a mystery out of what the aesthetic experiences of perceivers of any sort could possibly consist in.[63]

Let us recall that this passage comes from one of Levinson's earlier essays in which his aim was to prove the existence of just response-dependent aesthetic properties. So, when he talks about the presence of core aesthetic impressions of a qualitative sort distinguishable from reactions of approval, he is apparently not intending here to make any sort of non-response-dependent argument (at least if he were, that would contradict his conclusion at the end of that paper). To understand Levinson's intentions correctly here, one needs to be able to imagine that the purported core aesthetic content lies in the phenomenal impression of the perceiver (as well as in some sort of response-dependent property of the object), yet in a non-evaluative manner. In order to assess whether there is any evaluative content involved, one would then need to shift attention onto the phenomenal impression, even though there is also meant to be some sort of corresponding property in the object dependent on the perceiver's reception of it. In other words, for there to exist a response-dependent aesthetic property that produces a phenomenal impression with a core descriptive content, Levinson needs to show that the phenomenal impression can also differentiate evaluative from descriptive content. Yet, it is unclear how we could distinguish this simply by reflecting on our phenomenal impressions introspectively.

Now, contrary to Levinson's claim, it does not actually seem difficult to fathom what competent critics could be discussing without accepting the former's theory. It does seem

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[63] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 319.

reasonable to allow that critics - by definition - are not solely discussing matters of personal preference, otherwise there would be nothing to differentiate them from average untrained perceivers. However, this fact need not ensure that the core impressions underlying their aesthetic attributions or judgments possess anything uniquely *aesthetic* about them. That is to say that a plausible alternative to Levinson's position might be that critics merely experience certain impressions of the structural arrangements of lines, colors, shapes, pitches, rhythms, etc., then register the overall effect of those inputs, and finally deliver what is recognized as an aesthetic judgment or attribute, in which case the term 'aesthetic' would refer to the notion that they are reacting to an overall impression received from the senses.

This scenario differs from Levinson's position in two ways. First, because Levinson claims that an aesthetic perceptual property is not reducible to a normal non-aesthetic perceptual property, he wants to emphasize that the overall phenomenal effect of the arrangement (i.e. higher-order, therefore, aesthetic) is of a different qualitative way of appearing than the effect of the arrangement (i.e. lower-order, therefore non-aesthetic). As it will soon be revealed in the forthcoming discussion of neuroscience findings, there does seem to be evidence of holistic or gestalt perception of basic structural features, as in the case of perceiving lines, shapes, and contours of the face as actual eyes, noses, mouths, rather than disjointed structural entities. If holistic perception occurs with physical perceptual properties, as even Levinson admits, then even the purportedly 'lower-order' arrangement of structural features still generates phenomenal impressions revealing the overall effect. Thus, positing an additional way of appearing, as in the notion of 'higher-order perceptual properties', or attempting to differentiate 'a certain arrangement of lines and colors, etc.', from 'registering the overall effect of the arrangement in

question' does not seem to add any helpful explanatory component to a model of aesthetic properties.

Further, this fact makes Levinson's notion of 'higher-order properties' even more incoherent, since he makes two seemingly incompatible claims: (1) he admits of non-aesthetic holistic processing of structural properties, and (2) he argues that what makes aesthetic properties uniquely aesthetic is the fact that they are 'higher-order perceptual properties'. The problem for Levinson is that he cannot hold both of these positions and still assert that aesthetic properties are real, even if only in a response-dependent manner, because asserting their reality forces him to distinguish them from non-aesthetic perceptual properties, which he has not actually been able to do through his notion of higher and lower-order properties.

Secondly, contrary to Levinson's worry, not accepting his position does not necessarily lead to a mysterious understanding of the aesthetic experience of perceivers. Since structural properties generate holistic impressions that let perceivers register the overall effect of the arrangement, it would seem that we can have nearly an identical scenario to the one described by Levinson, and yet not interpret any of its stages as uniquely aesthetic. We can regard the overall effect of the arrangement in question as the holistic effect of structural properties. These are core impressions, but unlike Levinson, we would not describe them as 'aesthetic'. Then critics or other perceivers would characterize these impressions with neutral or value-loaded descriptions, either of which could be described by what are labeled 'aesthetic attributions'.

This could be a plausible account of agreement among the aesthetic attributions of different critics. But why would we call their experience aesthetic then? The answer would be quite similar to the reasons we might want to call experience aesthetic under Levinson's model, with the one exception that the term 'aesthetic' now would primarily denote either (1) something

less objective, more akin to individual interpretation due to the role of reactions of

approval/disapproval to the characterizations of the impressions, or (2) it would be a completely

sterile term reducible to the sort of holistic effect of structural properties, and hence entirely

objective. Either way, there would not be any uniquely aesthetic content capable of supporting a

sort of aesthetic realism position. Thus, Levinson's third reason also fails to specify why any sort

of uniquely descriptive aesthetic content ought to exist.

<u>Evidence from Neuroscience Against the Weak Claim</u>

Recent cognitive neuroscience research indicates mixed support for Levinson's claims.

More specifically, these findings suggest concern for the minimal credibility of even Levinson's

weak claim, since his notion of response-dependent aesthetic properties relies on the plausibility

of their being constituted in part by a non-evaluative purely aesthetic descriptive content

consisting of higher-order ways of appearing. On the one hand, the following examples reveal

favorably for Levinson evidence of holistic ways of appearing, and suggest that they are indeed

manifest. On the other hand, these neuroscience findings imply difficulties for Levinson both

with regard to his distinction of lower and higher-order perceptual properties, and for his claim

that what constitutes the substantive core of an aesthetic property is its higher-ordered way of

appearing.

Let us begin by examining more specifically the evidence from neuroscience of holistic

ways of appearing that might be manifest. In visual perception, the human brain employs two

distinct types of perceptual processing, with varying degrees of contribution dependent on the

types of stimuli presented: analytic processing and holistic processing.[64] For instance, the former

is used in order to decipher the letters that make up a word when trying to read written text. An

analysis-by-parts procedure occurs here. Holistic processing is used, on the other hand, for tasks

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[64] See Gazzaniga, Ivry, & Mangun's, "Cognitive Neuroscience: The Biology of the Mind," p. 249.

such as recognizing a handwriting style, or recognizing a human face. Here, the brain perceives a familiar *arrangement* of parts, even in novel cases of faces or handwriting styles. People who suffer from impaired face perception, or from what is known as *prosopagnosia*, have impaired holistic processing abilities, and thus must use their analytic processing system for nearly all object recognition tasks. This leads them to recognize faces at a much slower rate than individuals with intact holistic processing systems. The ample evidence of their impairment with facial recognition reveals the importance of holistic processing for basic visual perception tasks.

> Try recognizing the face in its upside-down orientation and then turn your book upside down. The effect is striking. Recognition is immediate when the stimulus is viewed in its proper orientation, but difficult with inverted faces. The effect is not limited to humans…One interpretation of the inversion effect is that we no longer can use a specialized face-processing system but must revert to a more analytic, analysis-by-parts mode of processing for an upside-down face. These faces constitute the perfect control stimulus for assessing the special status of face perception. Although stimuli in the normal and upside-down orientations contain identical information, only the normal condition should be disrupted in patients with prosopagnosia. This is exactly what was found… Research with healthy people reinforced the notion that face perception requires a representation that is not simply a concatenation of individual parts.[65]

In Levinson's terms, this research on facial recognition reveals that holistic perception does in fact occur.

Further findings indicate that the human brain perceives *hierarchically*, i.e., on multiple levels, including a *global* one that recognizes shapes and attributes, and a *local* one that perceives finer details. The local levels are embedded in the higher global levels.[66] Both levels seem to be equally immediate or direct according to neuroscience research findings. If we take at minimum the global level to be an approximation of holistic processing, these findings lend support to Levinson's notion that holistic ways of appearing are manifest or experienced directly.

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[65] Ibid., p. 245-246.
[66] Ibid., p. 467.

At the same time, this research also presents a problem for Levinson's distinction of lower and higher-order perceptual properties, a crucial feature of both his weak and bold realist claims. Neuroscience research reveals that holistic processing is employed to perceive stimuli not only in non-aesthetic ways, but more specifically, in order to generate impressions of simple structural or physical properties. In other words, cognitive neuroscience findings demonstrate that normal humans process faces holistically in order to perceive regular features such as eyes, ears, noses, etc., in both familiar and unfamiliar faces. When individuals employ an analysis-by-parts procedure instead of the holistic processing system, researchers attribute the switch to impairment produced by brain damage in the perceiver. If we put this in Levinson's terminology, it would seem that there would then be two possible interpretations of the neuroscience results: (1) evidence of what might be regarded as the presence of higher-order perception (i.e. holistic scanning of facial structures) that produces impressions of lower-order properties (i.e. structural features such as the nose, mouth, ears), or (2) since the mere recognition of these structural perceptual features requires holistic processing, it might make more sense to regard holistic processing as a lower-order type of perception rather than as a sort of higher-order perception.

In the first scenario, the gestalt impression would be constituted by the lower-order structural perceptual properties of the facial stimulus. In the second scenario, the holistic processing would just reveal the presence of a variety of physical structures, in which case the overall gestalt impression would be more akin to a sort of lower-order perception rather than a higher-order one. Either way, the boundaries of what constitute higher and lower-order properties become quite blurred. Neither of these scenarios are meant to imply that holistic processing would not be potentially capable of also generating other sorts of impressions, along the lines of the Levinsonian notion of aesthetic higher-order ways of appearing (e.g. the nose is

pretty), but there does not seem to be clear evidence for or against this, at least in the neuroscience facial recognition research. Thus, it becomes difficult to understand how to distinguish lower-order perceptual properties from high-order ones, in the way that Levinson wants to, since they appear to function much more interdependently, rather than as two distinct sorts of properties.

A failure of the ability to distinguish higher from lower-order perceptual properties is particularly problematic since Levinson's relies on the notion of higher-order ways of appearing to make the claim that a sort of uniquely aesthetic content can exist apart from non-aesthetic perceptual properties. If the boundaries between higher and lower-order perceptual properties cannot be properly clarified, it would be difficult to accept that aesthetic properties could actually be *real*, because that which distinguishes what are regarded as real aesthetic properties from not real aesthetic properties is some sort of uniquely identifiable aesthetic content. If Levinson cannot properly distinguish higher from lower-order perceptual content, he looses one of the main distinguishing factors of his view of aesthetic properties from an anti-realist's dispositional view of aesthetic properties.

Another problem for Levinson is that even if one could clearly distinguish lower-order perceptual properties from higher-order ones, there would likely be plenty of evidence of the existence of higher-order properties that are of a non-aesthetic nature. Again, given that Levinson's primary description of what constitutes uniquely aesthetic content lies in its identity with higher-order perceptual properties, it would then seem like the very criterion that is meant to make something aesthetic is not actually specific to the aesthetic realm. Then it would seem that Levinson really has little to reply to the question of what constitutes the core aesthetic substance of an aesthetic property.

One way to possibly redeem Levinson's model is to use the example of holistic processing for human faces as evidence that individuals often employ this perceptual mode to observe the features of objects, and that the potential fact of holistic processing occurring at the lower-order structural level of physical perceptual properties need not preclude it from also occurring at a different perceptual property level. For instance, it is plausible that a human face is processed holistically in order to recognize the presentation of physical features like the eyes, in addition to there being a secondary higher-order overall impression of the way that the face appears, as in the face appearing 'graceful'. The unitary aesthetic impression of the facial features need not necessarily collapse into the impression of the physical features themselves, since these could reflect two qualitatively different sorts of impressions, even if both are accessed via holistic processing. The significance for Levinson then is that there does not seem to be any particular evidence here to strongly endorse his distinction of higher and lower-order properties. However, at the same time, this research does not yet offer a reason in itself to reject the plausibility of his position.

Against the Bold Claim

Given the noted flaws with Levinson's arguments for his weak realist claim, his bolder claim, asserting the existence of non-response-dependent aesthetic properties, is already in a perilous state. For the sake of offering a thorough assessment of the bold claim, let us assume for now that his weaker claim for the existence of response-dependent aesthetic properties, consisting of uniquely aesthetic descriptive content, still stands as a reasonably cogent position. What then should we make of the additional steps he takes to try to establish the existence of at least some aesthetic properties that are non-response-dependent?

One of the first challenges here is making sense of Levinson's description of 'ways of appearing' as *implicitly* perceiver and condition-relative, while accepting that these parameters are not bound up in the *concept* itself of ways of appearing, such that it remains non-response-dependent.[67] There is an easy objection to make here, but fortunately for Levinson, it is a worry that can quickly be ameliorated. The initial concern is that if a property is inherently indexed to perceiver and condition-relative parameters, how exactly would these implicit features not figure in the actual concept of way of appearing, especially given that what Levinson does want to put in that concept is (1) ascription to the object rather than the perceiver, and (2) that it is a property that can be directly perceived?

Let us accept the meaning of 'implicit' to be roughly that some feature or thing is contained in the nature of another thing, albeit indirectly, but still inherent to the object under consideration. This definition may at first give an air of implausibility to Levinson's description of the compatibility of the implicit parameters with the conceptual features of ways of appearing. However, the verdict ultimately relies on exactly which part of the definition of 'implicit' we choose to emphasize. If ways of appearing are only *indirectly* condition and perceiver-relative, then it is possible that this relativity is not a feature of how they are in themselves, but the result of a co-requisite outcome. In other words, Levinson wants to say that ways of appearing are directly perceived because they emerge from objects themselves. He is getting at this point when he equates 'a subject's being appeared to in way W by O' with 'a subject's perceiving an object O's way of appearing W'.[68] In both cases, there is a way that the object appears, and there is also a subject who is perceiving. Thus, ways of appearing can be both implicitly condition and perceiver-relative and still be directly perceived and ascribed to the object, so long as one

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[67] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 219-220.
[68] Ibid., p. 217.

recognizes that a way of appearing fundamentally originates in the object, and only subsequently functions as an appearing to a subject. In this sense, condition and perceiver-relativity are implicit to ways of appearing because they characterize it indirectly, that is, through the subject's perceiving the way of appearing, but not in the concept itself of the way of appearing as emerging in the object.

Even if I have appeased concerns about the compatibility of implicit and explicit features of ways of appearing, there are three major steps in Levinson's argument for his bold realist claim that remain problematic. The first concerns his discussion of how ways of appearing or perceptual properties differ from dispositional properties. Let us grant his definitions, that 'ways of appearing' are manifest properties, and 'dispositions' are inescapably relational properties, such that a thing's disposition or power to cause effects or induce changes cannot be directly perceived but only inferred from those effects. The problem arises with Levinson's assumption that aesthetic properties are necessarily ways of appearing or perceptual properties rather than dispositional properties.

Given Levinson's descriptions of each, it is unclear how one could ever know for sure just from one's perceptual experience that an aesthetic property is really the result of immediate direct perception (i.e. a manifest property), rather than an appearance caused by a disposition of the object to appear that way (i.e. a dispositional property), since both alternatives ultimately generate perceptual appearances. Levinson wants to say that the fact of our having the impression of a particular overall effect, which we then characterize a certain way, should be enough to indicate that this phenomenal impression is a direct manifestation of object properties. In theory, this should be just as plausible as a dispositional view of aesthetic properties, but it certainly cannot be more likely, especially given that once again Levinson seems to be relying on

what he wants to prove as evidence of the truth of his position. Granted this, the dispositional view of aesthetic properties is no less logical than the manifest property view.

To account for the aesthetic experience of perceivers, the dispositional view would simply say that objects have certain properties which have the power to cause appropriately positioned perceivers to have certain phenomenal aesthetic experiences. Although this might sound quite similar to Levinson's alternative, the main difference is whether aesthetic properties can be defined by exclusive appeal to the object property or whether this also requires appeal to subjective reactions of possible perceivers. Our point is only that Levinson fails to offer any actual evidence for his view beyond theoretical plausibility, but this does not actually amount to an account of aesthetic property realism that surpasses alternatives such as the dispositional view, since both alternatives offer a similarly coherent explanation for our aesthetic experience.

Relatedly, the contingency argument which Levinson provides to purportedly show how aesthetic properties play a causal role in aesthetic experience similarly fails to definitively establish that aesthetic properties are manifest rather than dispositional. Recall from our earlier discussion of Levinson's arguments for his realist claims that this argument required that in order for an aesthetic experience of a dancer being graceful to really be caused by the way of appearing graceful emerging from the dancer herself, it would have to be a contingent rather than a priori fact that certain perceivers under ideal conditions experience the dancer as such. Otherwise, he argues that that which required explaining (i.e. the aesthetic experience) would be too intertwined with the explanation itself (i.e. how to understand what causes the aesthetic experience). In other words, it regarded response-dependent properties as a priori facts, and non-response-dependent properties as recognized by perceivers only contingently, since their

experience of a property was acknowledged as a separate matter from whether or not the property existed independently in the object.

The problem here with Levinson's reasoning is that focusing on the causality of an aesthetic argument does not differentiate manifest ways of appearing from dispositional properties, since dispositional properties can also play the same role in the contingency argument offered by Levinson. Further, as Levinson already noted, something can possess a way-of-appearing without in fact having the disposition to appear that way to relevant observers, due to the extraordinary circumstances of the thing in question.[69]

Taking this into consideration, the dispositional view of aesthetic properties begins to sound more plausible than the manifest property account, since it is possible that even though manifest properties are directly perceived, under the right circumstances, they might intrinsically lack the disposition to appear that way to subjects in certain circumstances. Given that we do have aesthetic experiences, is it not more plausible to assume that our reliance for ideal perceptual conditions for our aesthetic experience ought to indicate that aesthetic properties are indeed dispositional? The dispositional view will necessarily be at least partially correct (since it still attributes partial causality to object properties), even if aesthetic properties really are manifest properties, whereas adopting the manifest properties view risks offering a completely wrong interpretation of the status of aesthetic properties (since there could potentially be ways of appearing that we cannot even recognize as appearances). In any case, it is clear that the manifest properties argument, even with Levinson's argument about their causal contingency, still does no better than the dispositional account of aesthetic properties.

This brings us to a good point to reveal one of the most troubling inconsistencies within Levinson's theory. It concerns his attempt to distinguish ways of appearing from dispositions,

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[69] Ibid., p. 219.

and leads to quite a severe problem for the compatibility of his two realist claims. The problem can be isolated by reviewing the relevant statements implicated in the contradiction. First, as already mentioned in our discussion, Levinson allows a conflation of the terms 'response-dependence' and 'dispositional' such that he uses them interchangeably, and if he calls a property response-dependent, he also describes it as dispositional, and vice versa. Second, Levinson's weak claim asserts the existence of response-dependent aesthetic properties, which are such due to the feeling experienced by the perceiver in reaction to experiencing certain phenomenal impressions, the latter of which are meant to contain a unique descriptive aesthetic content reflecting higher-order ways of appearing by the object containing the aesthetic property. In addition, Levinson's bold claim asserts the existence of non-response-dependent aesthetic properties, which are such due to an absence of feeling experienced by the perceiver upon experiencing certain phenomenal impressions, the latter of which are meant to contain a unique descriptive aesthetic content reflecting higher-order ways of appearing by the object containing the aesthetic property. Finally, Levinson argues that ways of appearing are not equivalent to dispositions.

Granted acceptance that Levinson does indeed make all of these statements, where does the contradiction occur? The problem lies in the fact that if he denies that ways of appearing can be dispositions, there is no inconsistency within the bold claim itself, but there is a severe problem for the weak claim, since the latter treats response-dependent properties as dispositions, and more importantly, describes the nature of the content of aesthetic attributions of response-dependent properties as clearly being constituted by higher-order ways of appearing. In other words, Levinson cannot both deny that ways of appearing are dispositions to establish his bold

claim and simultaneously hold that ways of appearing are dispositions to support the reality of the aesthetic content of his weak claim.

To resolve this incompatibility, Levinson would need to do one of the following three things: (1) not identify response-dependent properties with dispositions; (2) find a different way to characterize the nature of the uniquely aesthetic content of his response-dependent properties so that it did not rely on ways of appearing; or (3) omit his argument that ways of appearing are not the same as dispositions. However, there are substantial problems with choosing any one of these methods of resolution. Selecting the first would significantly alter Levinson's explanation for what it would mean for an aesthetic property to be dependent on perceiver responses. In itself this seems like a sustainable solution, but it would require Levinson to put a lot of work into restructuring his theory. Meanwhile, the second option seems highly implausible since it is unclear what other sort of content could define a property as aesthetic if it were not some sort of higher-order way of appearing. Finally, choosing the third solution would significantly jeopardize any inclination towards adopting his bold claim, since his argument for the distinction between dispositions and ways of appearing was one of his strongest reasons to adopt it (but only relatively speaking that is).

Finally with respect to these specific arguments for Levinson's bold realist claim, I should like to raise a concern about his aligning the metaphysical status of aesthetic properties with that of secondary properties like color properties.[70] Even if we accept all of Levinson's preceding reasoning, acknowledging that aesthetic properties are manifest rather than dispositional, this only amounts to the claim that aesthetic properties are fundamentally a matter of how things look or sound, i.e., higher-order ways of appearing. Although this is essentially a statement about the looks or sounds of the object itself, there remains something uncomfortably

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[70] Ibid., p. 221.

unintuitive about such a claim. Perhaps it stems from the difference in how one might think about the physical properties of objects, such as the presence of grains of sand on a beach, as opposed to the existence of the property of the beach's being calming. In the former case, we have what are often recognized as primary qualities – not dependent on someone's perceiving them, but in the second case, we arguably have something more akin to secondary qualities wherein the attribute 'calming' very much seems to rely on a subject's reaction to that beach.

We cannot fathom such a property, even as a manifest way of appearing, existing without a subject there to perceive it. Perhaps this is what is so difficult to accept about Levinson's bold realist claim: the notion of aesthetic properties being manifest is simply incoherent to us from our point of view in the world. What is the meaning of a 'look' without an onlooker? This question when applied to secondary perceptual properties (e.g. matters of colors, tastes, sounds, sights, smells) of objects becomes much more difficult to answer than when applied to merely primary physical properties (e.g. matters of solidity or extension).

Matravers, Normativity, and Autonomy

Our discussion of the evidence for Levinson's bolder realist claim brings us to a good point for raising several objections made by Derek Matravers. I raise his concerns now, after having already evaluated the finer details of Levinson's position, because they illuminate the sort of final judgment issues that are often recognized as the benchmarks of victory or defeat in the battle of the aesthetic property realists against the anti-realists. More specifically, Matravers' objections consider how well Levinson's theory fares against the former's own dispositional anti-realism with respect to the overarching issues of what could account for the normative aspect of our aesthetic attributions, and how to make sense of our aesthetic experience. Thus, by

considering Matravers' criticisms here, I aim to show exactly why Levinson's realism is no more coherent than Matravers' anti-realism.

There are a few preliminary things to say about the Matravers' criticisms. As already mentioned, Matravers offers an ideal comparison point with Levinson because he also takes a dispositional view towards aesthetic properties, yet diverges from the latter by arguing that they do not constitute real properties because the attributions involving them lack any uniquely aesthetic content. Although never explicitly stated, his objections seem to be predominantly directed at Levinson's bold realist claim, rather than his weaker assertion. This is implied by the extent to which Matravers contrasts Levinson's position to a view of aesthetic properties as dispositions, in addition to the fact that the criteria he describes as being needed for any theory of aesthetic property realism includes the notion of 'stability' – that the property can exist unobserved.[71] It would seem that Matravers ignores Levinson's weaker claim because he is mainly concerned with refuting the plausibility of the bolder one, but it remains somewhat odd that the former never explicitly states this for the sake of clarity.

Another issue with Matravers's writing is that, despite efforts to the contrary, many of his objections blur together, so it is difficult to determine exactly how many different concerns he has with Levinson's position. This is especially true regarding his discussions of aesthetic autonomy and the normativity of aesthetic attributions, as we shall soon see. However, in Matravers' defense, I have already noted the complex interdependence of *existence* claims with *nature* claims of aesthetic properties, such that if one wants to claim that they exist, such an assertion depends hugely on how one describes in what they consist. Thus, I shall be imposing much of my own organizational structure on Matravers' objections in order to articulate his various complaints against Levinson.

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[71] See Matravers' "Aesthetic Properties," p. 202.

Matravers is content to set aside the question of whether it is possible to separate

descriptive from evaluative content in order to focus on what he considers to be the larger

obstacles for an aesthetic realist. These predominantly include (1) explaining aesthetic

experience in an ontologically parsimonious manner, and (2) accounting for the normativity or

correctness conditions of aesthetic attributions. Matravers' objections are well captured by the

following passage:

> My view, on balance, is that talk of aesthetic properties obscures rather than clarifies the
> issues. Aesthetic attributions are grounded in experiences of certain distinctive sorts that
> are caused by non-aesthetic properties, and which exhibit a wide measure of inter-
> subjective agreement. That much is common ground between those who use property
> talk, and those who do not. Where properties would do their work would be in explaining
> the normativity of aesthetic attributions. However, at least for Levinson, property talk
> seems to follow from such normativity (grounded in the inter-subjective agreement), not
> explain it. In short, I am not sure of the advantage, for Levinson, in using property talk.[72]

Recall earlier our reference to Matravers' criticism that it is invalid for Levinson to conclude the

existence of aesthetic properties from the following two claims: (A) the reason to believe that

aesthetic properties exist is that they imply normativity (such that if aesthetic properties are real,

then there really are correct and incorrect aesthetic attributions to be made), and (B) that if

aesthetic properties exist, they explain normativity. In other words, Matravers' complaint entails

the idea that evidence alone of the existence of normativity is not sufficient to assert the

existence of aesthetic properties, just from the fact that if aesthetic properties were to exist, they

would imply or explain normativity. This is a reasonable point by Matravers, and it reinforces his

overall objection that there are insufficient grounds to posit the existence of aesthetic properties.

Levinson nevertheless offers an extensive argument in response to Matravers, based on

the notion of *inference to the best explanation*, yet even this defense remains problematic for

reasons I shall shortly illuminate. The gist of Levinson's reply entails the following: we observe

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[72] Ibid., p. 208.

evidence of normativity of aesthetic attributions; we know that if aesthetic properties exist then they imply normativity; thus we should believe that aesthetic properties exist because that is the best explanation of the normativity that we observe. Because Levinson employs the term *inference* to the best explanation, it is tempting to naively accept the defense of his position to Matravers. After all, the former's argument ultimately rests on a matter of intuition to what seems to offer the "best explanation".

Levinson comes to his conclusion by considering three possible alternatives to explain the commonly acknowledged frequency of agreement among aesthetic judgments. The first alternative he considers is the position he endorses – that aesthetic properties are real. The second position is the standard anti-realist response to normativity – that non-aesthetic perceptual properties combine with perceiver psychologies to create aesthetic experiences. Finally, the third alternative he considers is that some aspect(s) of aesthetic experiences themselves are responsible for the observed correctness conditions of our aesthetic judgments.

To reach the conclusion that his own position is the best alternative, Levinson simply argues in rejection of the second option that "no one has ever succeeded in elucidating how such indefinitely varying and cognitively unruly ensembles can serve to underwite the normativity of aesthetic judgments."[73] He makes a similarly abrupt dismissal of the third alternative of aesthetic experiences themselves accounting for normativity by claiming that "then unaccounted for is which experiences, or whose experiences, make for correctness of attributions."[74] In defense of his own position's superiority over these two other alternatives, Levinson merely says that the two way relationship between normativity and the actuality of aesthetic properties is exactly what one ought to expect:

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[73] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties," p. 215.
[74] Ibid, p. 215.

For if the positing of aesthetic properties is the upshot of an inference to the best explanation, so that an object's possessing an aesthetic property is the best explanation of a parallel attribution to the object's being correct, is not that sort of two-way relationship precisely what one should expect? For a realist, aesthetic attributions admit of being correct or incorrect because objects really do have or fail to have aesthetic properties; but equally, the socio-linguistic fact of there being correct and incorrect aesthetic attributions gives us grounds to posit corresponding properties in explanation of that fact.[75]

Despite Levinson's efforts by reliance on the notion of 'inference to the best explanation' to escape Matravers' criticisms of circularity, the former's attempts ultimately fail. Not only is it circular to claim that aesthetic properties exist because our aesthetic attributions really are correct or incorrect, but Levinson's position suffers from the added flaw that just because his view might be the best interpretation of normativity that he can come up with does not mean that it is actually true or that we ought to believe in its truth. The primary reasons for this are twofold. First, there may be other alternatives that he has not yet considered. Second, he only offers one reason to reject each of the other alternatives, while offering very little on the positive side to believe his position. Further, it is not entirely obvious how we ought to interpret the criteria for what would constitute the 'best explanation'. It seems likely that Levinson intends this phrase to refer to the alternative that would tell the most coherent or fullest story of the nature of aesthetic properties. If this is indeed the notion of 'best' that he desires, it is difficult to know how much support would be needed to endorse his position over the alternatives.

Additionally, it is important to urge caution in instances when it may seem like one has the best explanation, when in fact one does not. In other words, just because Levinson claims that it is not clear how a non-aesthetic ensemble of perceptual properties, or one that accounts for correctness conditions through an explanation of other particular aspects of our aesthetic experience, could account for normativity of our aesthetic attributions, it does not mean that these alternatives are actually inferior to his position or implausible. As already noted, we must

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[75] Ibid, p. 215.

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agree with Matravers's conclusion that Levinson offers insufficient grounds to posit the existence of aesthetic properties, at least insofar as those grounds are based on observations of normativity among aesthetic attributions.

Diving deeper into the issue of normativity, Matravers' raises the related objection, resembling a complaint noted by the scholar Roger Scruton, that Levinson's appeal to qualified observers as a means of grounding the existence of aesthetic properties is circular or impossible. Matravers argues that the very notion of an ideal perceiver or critic is another case of circularity – if what makes a perceiver someone who views a work correctly merely the fact that that they view the work correctly – or in the second case *impossible* – if there can be no criteria on which to justify their judgments. He explains,

> Levinson is in danger of being caught in a dilemma. Either he defines the ideal listener in a way that includes reference to the content of their judgment, or he takes Hume's option and defines the ideal listener independently of the content of their judgment – in particular, by virtue of their background knowledge and forensic abilities. In the first case, the definition will be circular. The second case faces the obvious problem that no set of abilities, specified without reference to aesthetic judgment, will be sufficient to ensure excellence of judgment. This problem is particularly apparent on Levinson's view. If, as Levinson suggests, aesthetic properties are sui generis perceptual properties, then the ability of qualified observers to detect non-aesthetic properties (in whatever combinations) will fall short of the ability to detect aesthetic properties. This can be contrasted with the view that aesthetic properties are constituted by sets of non-aesthetic properties. If that were the case, the ability to detect the latter would be the ability to detect the former…It is possible that Levinson could satisfy us on this point, but he has not yet done enough to do so.[76]

Thus, we see here another instance of problematic reasoning for Levinson. In order for him to posit the existence of aesthetic properties as real, he needs to satisfy the implication that some class of perceivers, i.e., ideal critics, will be capable of perceiving these properties, otherwise, aesthetic property realism becomes even less plausible, since it would lose the criterion used to judge its objectivity, and it would also further undermine his argument which he described as

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[76] See Matravers' "Aesthetic Properties," p. 195-196.

offering the best explanation. This is clearly the case for evaluating Levinson's weak claim.

Although it may not seem so initially, this issue of justifying the notion of the ideal perceiver or

critic is relevant even to Levinson's bold claim. This is because Matravers' assessment of

Levinson's position depends largely, as already noted, on the extent to which it can offer an

explanation of observed agreement and disagreement among perceivers of varying sensitivity

levels. While the notion of an ideal perceiver is not intrinsically relevant to the success of

Levinson's bold claim (since a non-response-dependent property should be capable of existing

regardless of the status of ideal perceivers), it is crucial to any *evaluation* of non-response-

dependent aesthetic properties. Thus, in order for us to be able to acknowledge the plausibility of

Levinson's bold claim, Matravers' points concerning the legitimacy of Levinson's notion of an

ideal perceiver are relevant. After all, that is entire point of positing the notion of an aesthetic

property in the first place, at least according to Matravers, so that they can explain the

normativity of aesthetic attributions.

Is Matravers' criticism a reasonable one here? In the accusation of circularity, we must

agree that Levinson indeed proposes a circular definition of correctness. Evidence of this occurs

in the opening paragraph of his 2001 paper:

> Insofar as an aesthetic attribution is intended as objective, that is, as the attribution of a
> property of intersubjective import, such looks or impressions or appearances are
> relativized to a perceiver who views a work correctly, and thus approaches the condition
> of what has been called, following Hume, a true critic or ideal judge. That means, in
> particular, someone who properly situates a work with respect to its context of origin,
> including its place in the artist's ouvre, its relation to the surrounding culture, and its
> connections to preceding artistic traditions.[77]

In other words, if aesthetic properties are objective, then the criterion by which they are

recognized as objective, according to Levinson, is the fact that certain people perceive features of

objects correctly, wherein 'correctly' means 'properly'. However, it is unclear what criteria

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[77] See Levinson's "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," p. 315-316.

would suffice to count as proper. So, this is yet another case in which Levinson's definition employs the very term that he is trying to define. Thus, Levinson is ultimately unable to define a standard for 'correctness', thus leaving the concept of 'ideal perceiver' unspecified. The problem with this is that if he cannot specify what it means to be an ideal critic, it would seem that aesthetic properties cannot be regarded as objective, since they have lost their criterion by which we recognize correctness conditions of aesthetic attributions. Thus, Matravers is right again in his accusation of circularity here.

However, suppose we attempt to define an ideal critic independently of the content of their judgments, but rather based on their background knowledge of other properties. Is Matravers right in concluding the impossibility of this alternative, such that potentially no set of abilities could suffice as a standard of correctness without referencing aesthetic judgments? This time we must side with Levinson, for even if his perceptual properties are sui generis in a sense, their nature need not necessitate that the ability of qualified observers to detect non-aesthetic properties will fall short of their ability to detect aesthetic properties, contrary to Matravers' worry. This is because of the way that Levinson describes the essence of an aesthetic property. According to him, that which constitutes uniquely aesthetic content is not qualitatively different from non-aesthetic properties in a material sense, but rather differs with respect to the way that certain features combine to form an overall appearance. Thus, because aesthetic content differentiates itself through the *way* that it appears rather than through the actual perceptual details of its appearance, there need not be a distinct content that is potentially unreachable to ideal critics. Rather, it should at least be theoretically plausible that someone sensitive to non-aesthetic properties could become trained to perceive that very content in a slightly different way so as to develop the sort of aesthetic sensitivity worthy of that of Levinson's ideal perceiver.

Thus, the challenge of developing ideal perception without reference to the aesthetic content in one's judgments is not nearly so daunting a task as the problem of establishing what sort of correctness conditions an ideal perceiver ought to have.

Even if none of these problems of circularity, invalidity, or impossibility stand with regards to the ability of Levinson's aesthetic properties to account for normativity, Matravers believes anti-realism of aesthetic properties to be superior because it has a much easier means of handling this issue. He explains,

> If 'grace' is a property, then, of some object, either it is true that it has that property or it is not. Hence, each aesthetic attribution is either true or false, and the realist has to get this from fairly meager resources. The anti-realist faces the same problem, but need not face it to the same extent. It might be (indeed, we had better hope for the sake of art that it will be) that there are more or less appropriate ways of experiencing an object. However, that leaves it open that there might be several different appropriate ways. To show that there might be several different appropriate judgments the anti-realist need only show that, were a person to be able to experience the object in such the way the judgment recommends, they would have a valuable experience of an appropriate sort…[78]

In other words, because the anti-realist claims that there are no correctness conditions for aesthetic properties, he can explain the normativity or agreement among aesthetic judgments by the fact that there exist among perceivers merely common tastes and sensibilities which permit several different appropriate ways of experiencing objects aesthetically, where 'appropriate' refers to the notion of being in alignment with the majority views of perceivers.

Determining whether Levinson or Matravers makes a better argument on this point depends largely on how much agreement we acknowledge as present among aesthetic attributions. If we were to believe that there were never any cases of disagreement, clearly Levinson's position would be superior, and vice versa in the case of the opposite extreme occurring. However, the difficulty arises in determining how to handle instances, which many scholars would likely recognize as our actual situation, in which there are clearly many cases of

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[78] See Matravers' "Aesthetic Properties," p. 208-209.

agreement among lay perceivers as well as trained critics in their aesthetic judgments, but there are also significant cases of disagreement.

Assuming that both alternatives offer at least logically coherent stories, we are not really in a position to be able to determine which is more likely based on experience, due to the nature of the topic. However, at least we can speak to the degree of coherence of each position. Matravers' story for how the anti-realist handles normativity does not appear to suffer any glaring flaws; the most we might say about it is that it sounds plausible so long as aesthetic properties are not actually real, that is, so long as the lack of complete agreement among perceivers is not due to some defects in their sensibilities. Unfortunately for Matravers, there is little he can do to completely omit the possibility of Levinson's position, other than making the reasonable point concerning the scarcity of actual evidence that might compel us to believe it. However, both alternatives, at least concerning the problem of normativity, suffer from this problem, insofar as there is not enough incoherence to reject either position, but at the same time, there is not enough evidence to believe either.

Let us advance our discussion of Matravers' objections more directly onto the topic of making sense of aesthetic experience. He argues that the non-realist's position is also superior to that of Levinson's, because anti-realism is ontologically parsimonious, i.e., the anti-realist can explain aesthetic experience by relying on the way that a perceiver experiences non-aesthetic properties, and thus positing any additional sort of uniquely aesthetic property would be "explanatorily redundant".[79] How does Levinson's position stand against this criticism? The answer to this ultimately depends on how one explains the nature of aesthetic properties. Levinson's position can only be explanatorily redundant if it can be demonstrated that there is nothing particularly aesthetic about the descriptive content that is meant to constitute the core of

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[79] Ibid., p. 208.

an aesthetic impression. Our earlier discussion of findings from cognitive neuroscience research suggested that Levinson's distinction between higher and lower-order ways of appearing is problematically unclear. Thus, in the absence of other definitive evidence, we must incline on this point towards the superiority the purported ontological parsimony of Matravers' position.

One of Matravers' central objections within this topic of explaining aesthetic experience concerns the issue of *aesthetic autonomy* and Levinson's inability to deal with this problem in his realist account. 'Aesthetic autonomy' refers to the commonly held idea that aesthetic attributions exhibit 'autonomy' insofar as they require personal experience of a given phenomenon in order to assert them. In other words, merely hearing and reflecting on the non-aesthetic judgments of others may be enough to lead one to a different belief, whereas advocates of the notion of aesthetic autonomy assert that aesthetic attributions cannot be modified this way. Rather, they require personal perceptual experience with the object in order to initiate a change of mind regarding my aesthetic judgments.[80] Matravers explains that Levinson's realism constitutes a rejection of aesthetic autonomy, since the latter's position allows that perceivers may sometimes err in their aesthetic attributions and be expected to modify them even in the absence of firsthand experience:

> …it is possible on Levinson's view, to prove to someone that a certain aesthetic attribution is correct (by reference to the opinion of the majority of people, or perhaps even to Levinsonian 'ideal observers'), even if they do not have the experience that forms the ground of the attribution.[81]

Matravers illustrates this with the example of an ideal observer saying that a ballet dancer is graceful, while failing to see this for oneself. He rightfully explains that Levinson's theory accounts for disagreement among aesthetic judgments by positing distinct sensibility groups. What worries Matravers is not so much the fact that Levinson wants to establish distinct groups

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[80] Ibid., p. 198.
[81] Ibid., p. 199.

of perceivers according to their variations in perceptual sensibilities, but that there could still be disagreement within a single sensibility group. He explains:

> What concerns me is disagreement within a sensibility group. Let us consider a case in which everyone I ask claims that a ballet dancer is graceful and I do not experience her as such. Hopkins argues that this ought to prompt me to look again, and review the basis for my judgment, but not simply to adopt the view of my informants. Levinson, fairly obviously, cannot accommodate this intuition.

This passage is not suggesting that Levinson's view prohibits the possibility of individuals deepening their sensibilities or acquiring new ones. Rather, it refers to the scenario when one simply does not agree with the aesthetic experience of others within one's own sensibility group.

It is true, as Matravers claims, that Levinson's position rejects aesthetic autonomy. But is this actually a problem if aesthetic judgments can be deemed correct or incorrect solely by reference to an authoritative source, such as an ideal critic? Matravers devotes most of his energy on this topic to demonstrating that Levinson's position is indeed incompatible with aesthetic autonomy, rather than elaborating on exactly why such an incompatibility would be a threat to realism. On one hand, it should not constitute a significant problem for Levinson, given that the matter at hand is not merely whether or not one finds something agreeable in a subjective sense, but whether one is willing to make an aesthetic attribution, which is distinguished from mere matters of agreeableness by its normative character. In principle then, removing the subjective matter of like or dislike should not jeopardize the potential objectivity of the attribution, so long as someone somewhere originally perceptually received the appearance. Thus, the fact that Matravers would seem to prefer that the perceiver re-assess the look or appearance and reconsider the reasons that led him to his judgment, does not actually reveal any internal contradictions within Levinson's position, even if it leaves Matravers intuitively uncomfortable, since Levinson never claimed that his position did adhere to the standards of aesthetic autonomy.

It should also be noted, though, that Matravers is somewhat ambiguous about the need for Levinson to accommodate aesthetic autonomy. On one hand, he seems to use this failure as a reason to reject Levinson's realism, but on the other hand, Matravers seems to believe that a full accommodation of aesthetic autonomy would lead to too much of an aesthetic relativism. He writes,

> On the other hand, the philosophical territory in which one finds oneself if one attempts to accommodate aesthetic autonomy is, if anything, even less attractive. The obvious alternative seems to be a strong expressivism, stripped of all quasi-realist trappings. This faces the many objections that stem from denying the obvious: that aesthetic attributions operate in many contexts very much like standard propositions.[82]

Perhaps what Matravers wants then is for Levinson to relinquish his bold realist claim, and then to acknowledge that there is nothing particularly aesthetic within response-dependent aesthetic properties that would necessitate the implication of rejecting aesthetic autonomy. However, although Matravers does not raise the issue with regard to aesthetic autonomy, there still remains the problem of an ideal critic whose standards for correctness remain undefined. It is this issue which does pose a significant threat to occurrences of aesthetic disagreement within sensibility groups. This is due to the fact that one would necessarily need to rely on the opinion of the ideal critic even within one's particular sensibility group, yet as discussed earlier, it remains undefined what standards should be used to determine the correctness of the ideal critic. Thus, disagreement within one's sensibility group really is a problem for Levinson's realism.

It should be noted though that the need to posit diverse sensibility groups, even according to differences in perceptual sensibility (i.e., non-evaluative descriptive aesthetic content), should not in itself discredit Levinson's bold realist claim, so long as the standards of correctness for an ideal critic could be fixed. This is because he places the aesthetic way of appearing in the object and only concomitantly in appropriately positioned perceivers, so the fact that some people do

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[82] Ibid., p. 200.

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not observe a particular property does not mean it *cannot* be real, but it does weaken the evidence for thinking that aesthetic properties might be real.

To summarize our discussion of Matravers' objections to Levinson, I considered issues related to the normative aspect of our aesthetic attributions, in addition to how to make sense of our aesthetic experience. Specifically, I agreed with Matravers' accusation that it was circular to use the conditional fact - that if aesthetic properties were to exist then there would be correctness conditions – as evidence for the existence of aesthetic properties. Second, in considering another instance of Matravers' claiming circularity, I modified his criticism of Levinson's notion of an ideal critic so that the problem lay in an absence of standards of correctness for what would constitute the ideality of such a critic, rather than in a difficulty with a capacity to develop ideal perception out of the content of one's judgments. Third, I concluded that Matravers had insufficient evidence to claim that the anti-realist does a better job of explaining the occurrence of agreement among aesthetic attributions. However, I also noted that Levinson also lacks sufficient evidence to claim any superiority on this issue. Fourth, concerning the topic of aesthetic experience, I found that Matravers was somewhat justified in making the argument that the anti-realist's position benefits from ontological parsimony compared to Levinson's realism, which until the latter is able to definitively isolate a clear uniquely aesthetic content, risks being explanatorily redundant to an account of aesthetic properties made by entirely non-aesthetic features. Finally, I found that Matravers' discussion of aesthetic autonomy was only problematic for Levinson's realism insofar as it reinforced the problem already noted concerning unclear standards for isolating ideal critics.

CHAPTER 4

THE WAY TO DRAW THE LINE

In the present thesis, we have tried to make sense of Levinson's aesthetic realism, and have considered a range of objections to the story he tells and the reasons he uses to support it. Although he offers a creative and elaborate account of how aesthetic properties could be real, we must conclude that his version of realism fares no better an anti-realist interpretation of aesthetic properties as dispositions. This conclusion is based on the observed circularity of much of Levinsons' evidence, including how he accounts for the normative aspect of our aesthetic judgments, the undefined standards of correctness for ideal critics, and the related problem of aesthetic autonomy. Further, the arguments used to support his weak claim that the reality of response-dependent aesthetic properties is due to a uniquely aesthetic descriptive content were all found to be problematic, particularly due to the difficulty of establishing that evaluative content really can be isolated within core aesthetic impressions. Relatedly, his description of the nature of aesthetic properties as definitive higher-order ways of appearing was also found to be inconclusive as we discovered in our discussion of findings from neuroscience. Finally, all of this casts much doubt on the plausibility of there actually being any non-response-dependent aesthetic properties. Our consideration of arguments against this bold realist claim importantly revealed an inability to clearly distinguish aesthetic properties as ways of appearing from aesthetic properties as dispositions.

These results lead us to recall why Levinson was so keen to cling to his realist claims. He truly seemed to believe that the alternatives to his realism could not offer as full an explanation

of our aesthetic experience as his description of aesthetic properties. Also, he interpreted the abundance of aesthetic judgments in the world as being characterized more by agreement than disagreement among perceivers, and particularly among ideal critics. This led Levinson to characterize the disagreement as perceptual error, rather than as evidence of a lack of any sort of aesthetic property originating in the perceptual objects themselves. Our real objection to Levinson, thus, is not so much that he made any of these claims, but that he thinks his story is more plausible than one that regards aesthetic properties as akin to anti-realist dispositional properties.

At first glance, the distance between the two views may seem quite large, since a non-response-dependent aesthetic property realism requires making claims both about the ability to isolate evaluative from descriptive content, as well as requiring that its descriptive content is of a uniquely aesthetic quality. However, hopefully our work here has at least revealed somewhat that the distance between Levinson's response-dependent aesthetic properties and Matravers' desire to regard aesthetic properties as non-aesthetic dispositional properties is not so large. Here the issue of evaluative content can be set aside, since response-dependent aesthetic properties necessarily contain evaluative content, as Levinson himself admits. Resolving this difference between aesthetic properties as response-dependent versus as dispositions then just turns on how one interprets the nature of the descriptive content of our aesthetic impressions. As soon as one claims that the descriptive content cannot be captured by non-aesthetic structural properties, one becomes a realist.

What is perhaps most interesting about Levinson's position is that his account of what this uniquely aesthetic descriptive content consists in does not entail any sort of substantially distinct perceptual *content* from what he regards as non-aesthetic content. So, the entire

distinction between Levinson's response-dependent realism and Matravers' anti-realist dispositional view ultimately turns on the issue of *ways* of appearing, and whether there really could be higher-order ways of appearing that present holistic appearances of properties in a qualitatively distinct manner from the way that holistic impressions of structural properties appear. It seems to be this issue more than any other that creates the barrier between the realist and the anti-realist, and this need not be such an insurmountable boundary. Further, it should be noted that how one assesses the reasons given by Levinson and Matravers depends to a great extent on whether one sees the world as filled more with agreement or disagreement among aesthetic attributions, since this will determine which "facts" require justifying.

Given this proximity of oppositional positions, it would then seem that the main value of the aesthetic property realism debate lies in its ability to broaden our awareness of both the causal factors of our aesthetic experiences, as well as what happens when we utter an aesthetic judgment and expect others to agree with us, or when we feel compelled to adopt the verdicts of others, even when we fail to see something for ourselves. It is likely that we might never have enough evidence to conclude that aesthetic properties are definitively dispositions of the anti-realist sort, or real response-dependent properties, or even non-response-dependent properties, but at least we have hopefully expanded our concept of the aesthetic in this discussion of the topic.

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