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Aesthetics as evaluative forms of agency to perceive and design reality: A reply to aesthetic realism

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ABSTRACT

Following a naturalist-realist point of view, this paper attempts to contribute to the metaphysical question of whether or not reality includes aesthetics. During evolution, cognitive agents have constructed (goal-directed) regulatory abilities forming anticipatory contents in the form of feelings regarding opportunities for interaction. These feelings are considered to be the fundamental part of an evaluative or (what in this paper considered as aesthetic) behavior through which agents show a preference to aspects of their external world. Thus, 'aesthetic' denotes an agential behavior based on an organization of processes integrated in a form that identifies, evaluates, and compares sources of interaction-success or error in specific aspects of external reality. While agents approach the same aspects of reality as they all interact with the same world, our claim is that aesthetic normativity cannot be an objective feature of this reality. This model overcomes problems of correspondence in the sense that an agent's actions and thoughts *ought* to react to any pre-given (aesthetic) quality or norm, while at the same time it emphasizes the self-directedness of aesthetic behavior that enables the development of creative forms of cognition.

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1. Introduction

Speaking about aesthetics we always deal with a kind of perception (Sibley, 1965). However, the important question that follows is: '*Speaking about aesthetic perception, we deal with the perception of what?*' Are aesthetics real entities in the world that individuals can perceive or are they creations of our mind?

One of the most prominent debates in philosophy, that also characterizes the viewpoint through which aestheticians approach the problem of aesthetic perception, is between realism and anti-realism. This is a very ancient debate between two opposing schools of thought and deals with general metaphysical questions about the nature of reality.

In short, realism holds that the world and its contents exist independently of our thought and perception. Agents evolve in this world and learn about its properties through causal interactions with it. Thus, agents can ascribe, accurately or not, 'real' properties to the world not only for its observable part, which is the part that can be experientially explored, but also, they can develop theories or gain substantial knowledge of the non-observable reality. This is because the world we do not have physical contact with is just as real as the part we do have contact with. Realists accept that while agents may all approach the world from different perspectives, they are all living in and interacting with the same world. In contrast, anti-realism denies this and claims that the world is in some way dependent upon the agent's conscious activity so a 'true' description can be provided only for the part of the world in which they have an actual experience (see Godfrey-Smith, 2003; Hooker, 1995; Okasha, 2002).

The claim of aesthetic realism (A-realism) does not only discern that our environment is real and exists independently of the way that agents respond to it, but it has qualities which are also real. These qualities include normative aesthetic ones (A-qualities), which differ in essential respects from natural or scientific properties. While we accept realism and the objectivity of the external world, our position is differentiated from A-realism and its claim for inherent aesthetic normativity as an objective feature of the world that agents *ought* to perceive.

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Following a naturalist-realist point of view, we attempt to contribute to the metaphysical question of whether or not reality includes aesthetics. We suggest the integration of unconscious (psychological and physiological) states of the body constitutes an additional (organizational level of) regulation of cognitive behavior. We propose that this (implicitly psychological level of) regulation forms anticipatory perceptual content in the form of *feelings about opportunities for interaction.* Such regulation constitutes what we suggest should be identified as the *aesthetic form of (a functional) integration* causally related to external reality. Thus, contrary to traditional views of transcendental aesthetics,[1] the 'aesthetic' is nothing more than a self-directed behavior that concerns a particular organization of process interdependences aimed at detecting and evaluating opportunities for interaction regarding specific aspects of external reality. Self-directed agents, like humans, are not passive receptors of the external reality limited to decisions that *conform with a fact,* perceiving their world as they *ought* to. In contrast, such agents exhibit an organization that is also sensitive to the way they are related to their environment (a somewhat creative way), which allows them to develop high-order forms of cognition that will serve the dynamic and complex goals of life.

The paper is divided into two main sections. In the first section (see section 2) we critically present the claims of A-realism, providing input on problems related to the content of aesthetic perception (CoAP), the way it is connected to reality and its normative character. In the second section (see section 3), we identify the forms by which normativity emerges in perceptual content. Our view is mostly based on contemporary theories and explanations in the realm of inter-activism and embodied cognition, contemporary evidence from affective theory and findings from relevant studies in the experimental aesthetics and neuroscience.

Considering the problems that A-realism faces, we attempt not only to provide a new orientation to approach the metaphysical question of aesthetics, but also to offer a functional and realistic discerption of the cognitive phenomena that constitute the relation between aesthetics and reality. Our aim is not to explain all these phenomena completely. This would be an extremely ambitious task. Accordingly, we aim to explain the formation of the CoAP and the content itself. We cannot explain what an agent specifically likes or dislikes, and we do not deal with the outcome of particular aesthetic judgments or judgments of preference.

2. Aesthetic realism and aesthetic normativity

A central claim of all senses of A-realism is that aesthetics are a normative domain involving a two-fold veridical perceptual relation with the external world (see Beardsley, 1973; Cova & Pain, 2012; Prinz, 2011). This relation, for A-realism, is reduced to aesthetic properties or A-qualities and concerns a) how pleasurable (or displeasurable) is a perceived A-quality, and b) how accurate (or inaccurate) is this perception in correspondence to objective reality. In short, all things (designed objects, events, human beings, objects of nature, etc.) that can be aesthetically perceived are so because of their A-qualities.

This assumption has an important implication in our understanding of what A-qualities are proposed to be for A-realists. As we discuss next, A-qualities are not only real and objective properties of the world, but also they form the only *kind* of CoAP that an agent might have. This implies a direct relation between reality and the CoAP. But before we unfold this perceptual relation (see section 3) we need first to provide a brief description of how A-realism concerns A-qualities: a) as objective features of the world (see section 2.1) and b) as genuine perceptual content that represents reality (see section 2.2).

2.1. Aesthetic qualities as part of the objective reality

The whole idea of A-realism is based upon the realism/anti-realism debate, and the argument that the qualities of an object are meaningfully distinguished from how that object might be perceived by an agent. Accordingly, A-realists acknowledge that A-qualities (e.g. elegance, complexity, harmony, balance, etc.) appear as another feature of the object. Following realism, A-realists argue also that A-qualities should also be inherent in the object that possesses them even if there is no one there to perceive them.

The problems appear when A-realists attempt to justify a conception of A-qualities that meets one constraint and two requirements that we attempt to set in question here. The constraint concerns the argument that any aesthetic behaviour is reduced to problems that are related to A-qualities as *genuine conceptions of qualities* that their aesthetic-evaluative nature distinguishes them from any other kind of quality. This argument is considered valid by all authors in aesthetic philosophy as long as any contradicting claim is absent (Konigsberg, 2012). The two requirements that follow this constraint are: a) all A-qualities should somehow come into existence agent-independently, and b) A-qualities should acquire an agent-independent, normative character.

In short, the whole argument of A-realism is that the world, from its substances, creates normative (pleasurable or displeasurable) A-qualities which are as real as the world is, and such substances should certainly satisfy some aesthetic predication.

Considering the constraint, A-realists, in order to resolve these two requirements, are in search of a dependency relation that explains how A-qualities are connected to the real substances of the world. So, with the first constraint having already been set in question, A-realists are faced with an unresolved problem, that of distinguishing A-qualities from the non-aesthetic features (NA-features) of the world. Whatever this relationship could be, there must be some NA-features ultimately responsible for any A-quality and certainly for its normative character. As Sibley (1965, p. 146) puts it, "there always is, and must be, some *reason* why a thing has that quality" and this *reason* should not concern what (experts) agents believe about this quality. Zemach (1991) argues that this *reason* could set the normativity of the function of any A-quality, e.g. if a specific *reason* is satisfied, then the A-quality that appears

[1] While this argument seems relevant to the Kantian argument about intersubjective feelings of pleasure and the role they play into judgments of taste and beauty (see e.g. Kulenkampff, 1990 - and we thank an anonymous reviewer for this remark), our point of departure is quite different from the once dictated by the Transcendental perspective according to which cognition arises from two fundamental sources and their interplay: the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), and the faculty for cognising an object through these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is thought in relation to that representation (as a mere determination of the mind) (see Kant, 1999, p. 193). In this way, and based mostly on contemporary evidence that considers perception and feelings as one function, we are not aiming at explaining the possible factors that determine the development of beauty, thus seeking for an exceptional case of cognition. In contrast, we question any division of cognitive faculties into aesthetic and practical ones (elsewhere we have argued about how these faculties are related in the context of the emergence of representation, see Xenakis & Arnellos, 2013; 2014; 2015). In the light of the naturalist-realist perspective, the proposed model attempts to explain the implications of considering aesthetic behaviour as an goal-directed organization of cognitive processes that affects the way we perceive and appreciate the world (before any possible claim for beauty is formed). As a consequence, beauty is not considered as a presupposition for aesthetic behaviour but as a subjective cognitive implication of it. Thus, any attempt to distinguish the aesthetic behaviour from other categories like sensual judgments, judgments of reflection, moral judgments, empirical judgments, judgments of taste, and judgments of niceness or nastiness, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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