

## A Dispositional Account of Aesthetic Properties

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Delicacy, vibrancy, garishness, and other aesthetic properties feature prominently in our aesthetic experiences, and we intuitively speak of them as if they were real properties of the objects of those experiences. We also frequently disagree in our aesthetic judgments, however, leading to worries about subjectivism. I argue that aesthetic properties are dispositions, genuine properties of objects in the external world in virtue of which they cause aesthetic experiences for humans under the right conditions. They are defined by their manifestations — the characteristic qualities they impart to aesthetic experience — and by reference to which we identify and classify them. They are, nevertheless, properties of objects rather than of observers; as such, they serve an explanatory role with reference to aesthetic experience, serve as truthmakers for aesthetic claims, and underwrite the normative elements of aesthetic discourse.

Given the inescapable subjective elements in human aesthetic experience, some have concluded that if aesthetic properties can be said to exist at all, they depend on observers — beauty is not skin-deep, but in the eye of the beholder, as Nick Zangwill puts it. On the contrary, I argue that aesthetic properties depend for their existence solely on the objects in the external world that instantiate them. I allow that aesthetic properties are *conceptually* response-dependent, that we must identify and classify them by reference to human responses, but that this does not imply *ontological* response-dependence. I support this claim by arguing for a dispositional model in which the aesthetic disposition is carefully distinguished from its manifestation, the aesthetic response it causes, and the condition for manifestation, namely a qualified observer in appropriate background conditions.

Aesthetic properties, like non-aesthetic sense-perceptible properties such as colors and sounds, are dispositions whose conditions for manifestation require the presence of a qualified observer. The qualified observer, in turn, possesses dispositions to respond to such properties: normal perceptive abilities, in the case of sense-perceptible properties, and aesthetic taste (in Frank Sibley's sense) in the case of aesthetic properties. These observer dispositions form reciprocal pairs with the dispositions of the objects of sense or aesthetic perception, where each meets the conditions of manifestation for the other, and a joint manifestation event occurs. The reciprocity here is analogous to that of a soluble substance such as salt and a solvent such as water: the dispositions to dissolve and to be dissolved manifest jointly in the creation of a salt-water solution.

I contend that most differences in aesthetic judgment regarding the (descriptive) aesthetic character of an artwork or other object can be accounted for by differences in observers or conditions of observation. My appreciation of a Japanese painted screen, for instance, is limited by my lack of qualifications in understanding the genre and cultural background of the piece, though I do respond to some of its aesthetic properties. In this case, my judgment should give way to that of a more ideal observer. In other cases, however, we have little reason to privilege one kind of response over another, and I conclude that objects may well have multiple sets of aesthetic dispositions, only some of which will manifest to any given observer. These aesthetic properties may even manifest themselves in nearly opposite sorts of responses; I contend that this does not defeat a realism about aesthetic properties, because it is possible for an object to have dispositions to bring about opposing states, relative to the conditions that obtain. This explains aesthetic differences across times and cultures, and allows me to maintain that aesthetic properties are genuine features of objects in the world.

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