Abstract: This chapter introduces and defends a pragmatist model of aesthetic disagreement that avoids many of the philosophical puzzles generated by the traditional, semantic, approach. Mainstream philosophical inquiry into aesthetic disagreement begins with a rather innocuous assumption: to understand what’s going on we must first explain what disputants are saying, which involves identifying the meaning of the relevant expressions or determining how aesthetic claims could be true. However, this task brings with it a new host of semantic and epistemic puzzles and fails to vindicate the central role aesthetic disagreements occupy in our aesthetic lives more generally. Further, it isn’t clear how settling the meaning of aesthetic expressions bears on everyday aesthetic disagreements. Paying attention to what we *do* in an aesthetic disagreement will give us a better chance at identifying what matters for determining what we *say*.

Keywords: Disagreement, Meaning, Metasemantics, Pragmatism, Reddit, Truth, Puzzles, Deflationism

**A Pragmatist Approach to Aesthetic Disagreement**

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Aesthetic disagreements are familiar, pervasive, ubiquitous, and occupy a central part of our aesthetic lives more generally. In caring about art and aesthetic value, we disagree about art and aesthetic value. Aesthetic value is both something wholly personal and something irreducibly social – we often *seek* *out* aesthetic disagreements because we want to know if others agree with us, to help us figure out what’s going on, or to share our insight with interested or unwitting parties. Aesthetic disagreements aren’t just ubiquitous, they’re unavoidable. Living an aesthetic life is hard work. We find ourselves in disagreements over a wide array of aesthetic topics for a variety of reasons, and such disagreements involve a seemingly infinite class of expressions, claims, and responses.[[1]](#footnote-1) We take time explaining why our interpretation captures all the relevant facts and we challenge others’ evaluations or interpretations, we take others to be *wrong* in their aesthetic evaluations or attempts (as evidenced by our attitudes and behaviors). We also disagree over questions that we know – at least implicitly – wouldn’t be settled by observational facts such as which artist has the highest number of YouTube streams. As a self-avowed Bob Dylan fanatic, I am all-too familiar with allegedly trivial aesthetic disagreements. If you were to visit the “General Topics” section of the internet discussion board and Bob Dylan news site, www.expectingrain.com, you would find threads such as “If Blonde on Blonde were a single album, would it be better than Blood on the Tracks?”,[[2]](#footnote-2) “Bob’s Best Covers”,[[3]](#footnote-3) or “The Worst of Bob Dylan.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, in caring about aesthetic value, we can’t help but care about what others think about it as well, no matter how silly or inconsequential.

While aesthetic claims appear to be the sorts of things that can be true or false, aesthetic interpretation also eludes any final evaluation, given that even the artists themselves can sometimes get it wrong. As Alva Noë observes: “it may be essential to the art encounter...that there are no decision procedures, no rules, no way of proving who’s right and who’s wrong. But art nonetheless raises the question: Who’s *right*?” (2015, 132). Though we can be mistaken in our aesthetic interpretation, the sorts of things that settle an aesthetic disagreement are not easily identified or agreed upon. Mainstream philosophical inquiry into the nature of aesthetic disagreement begins with a rather innocuous assumption: to understand what’s going on we must first explain what disputants are saying, which involves identifying what the relevant words mean or how claims involving them could be true. However, this task brings with it a host of philosophical puzzles: What is the meaning of an aesthetic expression like ‘beautiful’? What do our aesthetic expressions refer to? How can speakers have knowledge of the semantic properties of their utterances? What makes aesthetic propositions true? Are aesthetic properties “out there” in the world? However, it isn’t clear how answering any of those questions will help us explain the practical dimensions of aesthetic disagreements: their pervasiveness, ubiquity, significance, and centrality in our aesthetic lives.

As the topics surveyed above suggest, we engage in aesthetic disagreements over seemingly trivial concerns, often without resolution. Yet, philosophers have failed to provide an account of the meaning of aesthetic expressions that also vindicates the practical significance that aesthetic disagreements play in our lives more generally. In this chapter I introduce an alternative pragmatist model of aesthetic disagreement that captures the practical significance of aesthetic disagreement and avoids many of the philosophical puzzles generated by the traditional approach. Paying attention to what we *do* in an aesthetic disagreement will give us a better chance at identifying what matters for assessing what we *say*.

This chapter goes as follows. First, I survey some of the features of aesthetic disagreements. Second, I’ll outline the dominant methodology for theorizing about aesthetic disagreement: what I call the “semantic” approach. I then argue that the semantic approach will not capture why aesthetic disagreements are familiar, pervasive, ubiquitous, and central to our lives more generally. Third, I’ll introduce an alternative pragmatist model of disagreement and show how the pragmatist is better positioned to explain the practical significance of aesthetic disagreement while avoiding many of the problems that plague semantic accounts. My conclusion is both conciliatory and prospective. I’ll consider whether I am guilty of conceptually engineering ‘aesthetic disagreement’ and what I can say to semantically inclined philosophers in light of this worry. I’ll end by noting how the pragmatist approach is better suited to accommodate the social and historical dimensions of aesthetic value and discourse.

What We’re *Not* Talking About When We Talk About Aesthetic Disagreement

Philosophers are drawn to theorizing about aesthetic disagreement because they arise even when disputants are being reasonable and well-informed.[[5]](#footnote-5) Sometimes, we might *think* we disagree with someone when we are genuinely *wrong* about or ignorant of the relevant facts. For example, if you assert that “*Desire* was released in 1984” and I respond by saying, “No, it wasn’t.” – we are debating over the truth of the proposition “Desire was released in 1984.” Luckily, there is an established method for resolving the dispute: checking the official album list on [www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com). In other cases, we may adopt different referents or meanings of the same word, such as whether Desire is Dylan’s most “impressionistic” album, which risks entering a pseudo-disagreement because we aren’t disagreeing over the truth of a single proposition.

Aesthetic disagreements are often considered paradigmatic instances of “faultless disagreements” because they can arise even when disputants are being reasonable and well-informed. However, when it comes to “matters of taste” it *really* is the case that no one can get it wrong, so to speak. Consider a thread with a title such as “Saved is a Great Album”,[[6]](#footnote-6) or the sorts of Facebook groups dedicated to a particular director, genre, or franchise – the sorts of exchanges made in these contexts are often interpreted as *sharing* aesthetic preferences rather than expressing a world-directed mental state with propositional content (that has corresponding intentional “aboutness” or directedness, the sort of thing that can be assessed by others as right or wrong). If disputants are merely sharing their subjective preferences, then they are not pressured to settle the debate because there is no *conflict* about what’s “out there” in the world. We can both shrug our shoulders and agree to disagree about the spiciness of the curry without the interaction feeling like a failure. The lack of a demand to reach an agreement is taken to be a marker that the debate lacks normative force: surely, if I was making a claim about the world, then I would view our encounter as a failure if you did not come to agree with me – I could be wrong about reality itself. However, the fact that some interactions *look* like disagreements but are best explained as expressing or sharing preferences and so won’t demand convergence does not, or should not, entail that genuine disagreement *requires* reaching an agreement.[[7]](#footnote-7) I’ll return to this point later.

Philosophers typically model genuine disagreements in the following way: one disputant utters a sentence that expresses a proposition with content P while their interlocuter expresses a proposition with content roughly equivalent to Not-P.[[8]](#footnote-8) If I were to assert that, “Love and Theft is a better album than Blood on the Tracks” and you responded “No, it isn’t” then assuming for the sake of this paragraph that we disagree over the truth of the same proposition, it isn’t clear what method, if any, would resolve the dispute. Thus, in a genuine disagreement both disputants cannot be right, but they must be *talking about the same thing*, which explains why the disagreement is not the result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication. Should every legitimate disagreement achieve agreement in order to be successful? Consider again the sorts of disagreements we encounter online: even though the thread is titled “Saved is a Great Album” if everyone simply posted in agreement (or ignored it) the thread would be a failure. Often, the author of such threads is inviting or soliciting others’ evaluations, and the point of the encounter is to offer reasons, or defense, of why one either does or does not agree. So, in a genuine aesthetic disagreement, disputants must express or endorse incompatible propositions.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the following section I argue that standard philosophical approaches to aesthetic disagreement combine the incompatibility assumption with a broadly “semantic” approach that generates metaphysical and epistemic problems that fail to illuminate the concrete activity of aesthetic disagreement.

The Semantic Approach to Aesthetic Disagreement

Consider again the plethora of disagreements we encounter online -- they can arise over a seemingly infinite class of aesthetic declarations, interpretations, or evaluations. For example, take any post on the “Unpopular Opinion” Reddit forum, such as the following: “Danzig 4 is a great album, it’s not all about Danzig 1-3. Danzig 4 is better than Danzig 1, fight me.”[[10]](#footnote-10)Commenters respond by either agreeing or proposing a different Danzig album that they consider aesthetically superior; the important things is that they defend their claimings, they do not simply *dismiss* the claim as incompetent or unintelligible – this seems like a paradigm example of a faultless aesthetic disagreement. But where do we go next? In his 2018 book *Being for Beauty* Dom Lopes offers a survey of (philosophizing about) aesthetic disagreement that begins with the following observation:

Disputes are verbal, expressed in words. Therefore, to get an accurate read on our discursive situation, we need to know what we are saying and why, so we need some apparatus to characterize *first* the semantics and *then* the point of aesthetic discourse. (166, my emphasis)

Lopes is endorsing what I’ll call the “semantic” approach to philosophizing about aesthetic disagreement, a method that is almost universally shared in the literature.[[11]](#footnote-11) According to the semantic approach, philosophers should first identify the meaning of the relevant expressions and/or the truth value of the relevant propositions, then they will be able understand the point of the disagreement. As I mentioned above, in a genuine aesthetic disagreement disputants must endorse incompatiblepropositions in order to be talking about the same thingand thus at least in principle, able to come to an agreement. The philosophically substantial task involves identifying the relevant semantic properties that explain how both disputants could – at least *prima facia* – be speaking truthfully and meaningfully, yet genuinely and pervasively disagree. Philosophers who endorse the semantic thesis find themselves debating about which non-linguistic factors do or should bear on the truth of our aesthetic declarations – ironically like aesthetic disagreements themselves - without any established method for settling the dispute. Semantic approaches are often guided by questions such as: What linguistic or non-linguistic facts *determine* propositional content? What facts *explain* the truth of aesthetic judgements? What do aesthetic expressions and the like *refer* to? What is the *meaning* of an aesthetic predicate like ‘beautiful’? What makes aesthetic judgements *true*?

On the traditional model the philosophically worthwhile features of an aesthetic disagreement are fundamentally *semantic* items such as reference, meaning, intension, propositional content, truth-makers, and truth value. Extant work on aesthetic disagreement typically adopts a truth-semantic framework, where meaning is treated as identical to truth, and propositions represent or refer to the non-linguistic world. Propositions are composed of words that express concepts (mental entities), and concepts are individuated in virtue of their content. Let’s consider a couple of paradigmatic semantic approaches. Following King 2023, such approaches endorse universalism about aesthetic reasons. According to the universalist, aesthetic values, facts, or concepts are mind-independent and as such they apply to all suitably equipped aesthetic agents. If genre concepts refer to regions of conceptual or logical space, and the point of a disagreement over genre classification is to determine which concept of, say, ‘science fiction’ actually refers to the correct partition of logical space, or which mental concept of ‘science fiction’ tracks the right (non-mental) conceptual location. In other cases, the disagreement might be explained as a case where disputants are speaking truthfully using the same word but disagree about the meaning of the relevant expression or expressions.[[12]](#footnote-12) Consider a debate over which performance of Tangled Up in Blue during the 1977 Rolling Thunder Revue Tour is most “impressionistic” – you and I and are not mistaken or ignorant of any of the relevant linguistic, aesthetic, and non-aesthetic facts, yet we take “impressionistic” to apply to different instances of Tangled Up in Blue. In this case, we each associate the word ‘impressionistic’ with a distinct meaning (M1 and M2), and so do not genuinely disagree at the level of propositional content (because we do not express incompatible propositions) but somewhere else (e.g., which meaning to attach to ‘impressionistic’ given the communicative context or which arrangement is actually in the extension of the concept). Remember, the semantic thesis requires explaining how disputants could be speaking truthfully while also expressing or endorsing incompatible contents.

On the semantic approach, disputants must share some relevant content, commitment, or belief which explains why the disagreement is not the result of a misunderstanding or miscommunication, even if the disputants are not blameworthy for failing to identify the *actual* source of their disagreement. For example, work on the nature of faultless disagreement is largely motivated by concerns with the semantics of subjective expressions or matters of mere taste. But people have and are engaging in aesthetic disagreements, seemingly competently, without awareness of fine-grained semantic notions or distinctions. The commitment to prioritize how disputants are speaking truthfully often invites relocating the incompatibility somewhere else: semantic meaning, contextual standards, intension, conceptual function, or aesthetic profile, to name a few.[[13]](#footnote-13) Now philosophers must take a stand on metaphysically dubious semantic items to explain the truth of claims that refer to or describe aesthetic properties, which are themselves not reducible to non-aesthetic facts or empirical observation. Consider the amount of literature that has been produced in response to the metaphysical problems raised by a statue and its clay. Philosophers that adopt the traditional semantic approach also often assume that language is primarily in the business of representing or referring to non-linguistic reality.[[14]](#footnote-14) If propositions aim to accurately represent or reflect non-linguistic reality, and there is only one right way to conceptually carve out the world, then only one disputant can be correct (at best). Moreover, if a particular disagreement does not fit into a theory of aesthetic expressions, then the likely outcome is that the disagreement is non-substantial – an obstacle to progress, or a waste of time.

Aesthetic disagreement arises when we agree on the relevant non-aesthetic facts yet disagree about the truth of an aesthetic evaluation or proposition. Aesthetic discourse is a philosophical challenge because aesthetic claims aren’t exhausted by scientific or empirical observation. The assumption that aesthetic vocabulary represents or refers to non-linguistic reality invites burdensome ontological and epistemic commitments familiar to those that work on the meaning of modal, moral, and mathematical discourse. While philosophers are well-poised to accept that empirical observation won’t settle long-standing debates about the nature of artworks and artifacts, they continue to find themselves entangled in quagmires that arise from taking the referents to be “out there” in the world to discover. While some semantic views do not take successful disagreement to require convergence on the truth of a single proposition, they posit that the point of an aesthetic disagreements is to “coordinate” (Sundell 2017), align “world views” (Stephenson, 2007), to “get on with things” (Lopes 2018), or “vibe” (Riggle 2021). In order to focus on purportedly philosophically substantial targets like meaning or truth, semantic accounts struggle to explain the practical significance of disagreement. Even if aesthetic disagreements are pervasive, they are still something to be overcome or resolved because they pose an obstacle to knowledge about aesthetic value (or the practical actions that follow from making an aesthetic judgement).[[15]](#footnote-15) However, ordinary speakers aren’t typically concerned with metaphysically heavyweight stuff like aesthetic profiles, conceptual function, or contextual standards. In other words, the sorts of things philosophers care about in explaining the nature of aesthetic disagreement come apart from the concerns of the disputants themselves.

Now I’d like to consider four problems raised by the traditional, semantic model of aesthetic disagreement. First, philosophers that endorse a semantic approach will be pressured to take a stand on the nature of aesthetic expressions, whether aesthetic concepts have vague borders, involve intentions and extensions, are partitions of logical space, concrete historical particulars, whether they function referentially, or are “essentially contested”. Remember, they are already committed to a model of language as representing non-linguistic reality, combined with a methodology that holds meaningfulness to be identical with truthfulness. In order to maintain the principle that disputants could be speaking *truthfully* philosophers have to posit the existence of truth-makers; on the semantic approach truth and meaning are in need of explanation.[[16]](#footnote-16) Each account brings with it explanatory baggage that invites further philosophical puzzles and problems. If we think that disputants are arguing over things “out there” in the world, then this invites problems about the referents of aesthetic concepts and whether speakers can know anything about them (given that they are likely non-observational, e.g., aesthetic properties or dispositions).

Second, the semantic approach invites metaphysical commitments that are not amendable to empirical observation. Art kinds or concepts elude descriptive conceptual analysis more obviously than non-art kinds: we have yet to find an uncontestable set of features that all instances of an art kind like ‘statue’ must or do share. And then again, philosophers encounter difficulties in specifying the metaphysical nature of aesthetic properties and features, whether they emerge from non-aesthetic properties or merely from our minds, and what sorts of relation there may be between *us* and *them* that explains all the different sorts of aesthetic judgements competent speakers make. In fact, once we adopt a truth-semantic approach to explain the nature of aesthetic disagreement, we will likely encounter a suite of philosophical puzzles because of the gap that arises between the semantic factors that determine meaning or truth, and the sorts of things a speaker can be expected to be aware of or sensitive to.[[17]](#footnote-17) For example, universalism invites (but does not entail) metaphysically heavyweight commitments about aesthetic value, even if it is permissible for agents to pursue aesthetic preferences that diverge from the universally valid ones. The universalist seems vulnerable to the same problems as traditional semantic approaches because it is unclear how speakers can know anything about which values are in fact universally valid. Further, universalism suggests that experts are justified because they are in a better position to track or discover the universally valid values. The pragmatist, we will see, places aesthetic value and aesthetic expertise squarely in human hands – it is “up to us” what counts as aesthetic valuable and who counts as an aesthetic expert.

Third, the semantic approach doesn’t help vindicate the practical significance of aesthetic debates. For example, it isn’t clear if concepts are “really” partitions of logical space, or whether modeling them as partitions of logical space is better suited for some theoretical or explanatory goal. But even if we were to agree that genres really are regions of conceptual space, it isn’t clear how *that* would explain why disagreeing about genres is worthwhile, or why such disagreements play an important role in our aesthetic lives more generally. Conceptual content, on the traditional semantic view, is atomistic or “free floating” which is to say it bears no essential connection to a speaker’s psychological states. It is one thing to possess the concept ‘science fiction’ and another to *use* that concept to motivate action. In this way we can capture how disputants use the same words, and talk about the same thing, while disagreeing about the practical consequences. Further, we are committed to the existence of “meaning” as playing an important explanatory role: explaining what *makes* actual aesthetic sentences true. If aesthetic expressions refer to or represent non-linguistic reality, then we must go on a metaphysical quest to discover the nature of the referents or representeds. Now we’ve shifted the debate from aesthetic disagreement to the nature or meaning of aesthetic or evaluative terms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, philosophers have not settled on a correct theory of the nature of aesthetic expressions, which means they have not yet determined what disputants are “saying” in an aesthetic disagreement, let alone what they might be “doing.”

Fourth, semantic approaches are also vulnerable to the epistemic issues raised by metasemantic externalism: speakers can be massively ignorant or mistaken about the meanings of their words because they lack epistemic *access* to the factors that determine the content of their utterances, as well as theability to deliberately manipulate those factors to converge on a meaning.[[18]](#footnote-18) More generally, we shouldn’t expect everyday speakers to have the ability to detect when they are debating about the conceptual function, extension, or intension of a concept rather than something auxiliary, such as what they take to be the relevant evidence.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, lots of people all over the world seem to engage in aesthetic disagreements, and do so competently. Yet, with a semantic theory in hand philosophers are given the information necessary to explain whether or how the disagreement should end and what it takes for one’s sentences to be true (note that this is different from determining what it takes for one to *know* whether the sentence is true). It is as if philosophers are describing the phenomenon from the outside peering in. Relatedly, it isn’t clear why philosophers are in the best position to discover the relevant semantic properties to begin with, nor is it obvious why determining semantic meaning sheds light on the role of aesthetic disagreements in our lives more generally. For the pragmatist, such metaphysically heavyweight externalist approaches risk becoming what Richard Rorty (2021) deemed the “authoritarianism” of epistemic foundationalism. If the truth of what I say holds independently of what others think or do, then to reject my utterance is to deny the truth, which is to deny reality. If ‘truth’ plays an explanatory role, then once we explain what “makes” what we say true, others have no choice but to submit, lest they deny the truth. It leads to a type of semantic authoritarianism.

According to the semantic approach, the correct procedure for making sense of an aesthetic disagreement is to discern what disputants are *saying* before making sense of what they are *doing*. However, in the quest to explain what disputants *mean* or how they could be speaking *truthfully* philosophers end up theorizing about theoretical entities like intension, semantic meaning, reference, and truth-makers; further it isn’t clear that specifying semantic meaning or truth will illuminate why aesthetic disagreements matter, why people spend time and energy engaging in them, and how they can be features of our aesthetic practices “in working order.” The semantic approach misconstrues the nature of aesthetic agreement, and as such it would be misguided to assume it is the best tool for understanding the nature of aesthetic discourse, aesthetic expressions, and the role that aesthetic disagreements play in our social and aesthetic lives more generally.[[20]](#footnote-20) Aesthetic disagreements are philosophically interesting because they admit of such a variety of forms and features: semantic issues dominate the philosophical literature. Why not think that broadly *social* tools could also aid in our efforts to better understand the nature of aesthetic disagreement and discourse? Additionally, some philosophers of art have begun shifting away from representationalist vocabularies of properties and essences to *normative* vocabularies: prioritizing the role of trust, sincerity, authenticity, intimacy, and the like in our aesthetic evaluations and attitudes. We need a framework for theorizing about aesthetic disagreement that will help us explore the ways this activity hooks up with social, rather than semantic, concerns.

A Pragmatist Alternative

As a reminder, I’m interested in explaining the pervasiveness of aesthetic disagreements in a way that also captures their practical significance – the sorts of “low stakes” disagreements we encounter in our day-to-day aesthetic lives, such as on the internet or outside the movie theater. I think we can *recover* the practical significance of pervasive aesthetic disagreements and avoid many of the puzzles that plague semantic accounts if we set the semantic thesis aside and adopt a pragmatist approach instead. The pragmatist inverts Lopes’ semantic approach and assumes instead that philosophers should *first* identify the *function* of the relevant expressions and/or the *communicative role* of the relevant sentences, *then* they can understand what disputants are saying. On the pragmatist model, what matters in an aesthetic debate is not who is speaking truthfully, but the practical implications of our thought and talk; disagreements are attempts to “work out” the implications, and presuppositions of our aesthetic commitments. We do not need any special insight or capacity to know the content of our words, just other people we recognize as capable of judging the permissibility of what we do and say. According to semantic accounts, the content of our concepts or terms is atomistic, fully determinate, and not up to us. According to King 2023, anti-universalist views hold that aesthetic disagreement and diversity are instrumentally valuable because they foster aesthetic communities and support the development of aesthetic personalities. Moreover, the anti-universalist typically holds that the reality of aesthetic diversity and the value of aesthetic disagreement are incompatible with universalism about aesthetic value. I am not taking a stand on whether aesthetic disagreement is a good, but offering an account that vindicates the fact that aesthetic disagreements are familiar, ubiquitous, pervasive, and important to our aesthetic lives more generally. I take it most pragmatists would be anti-universalists due to the metaphysical commitments typically associated with such views.

For the purposes of this chapter, pragmatism entails three methodological assumptions. One, there is no antecedently privileged way of describing or carving up the world; contingency takes the place of necessity. Two, language is not primarily in the business of referring to or describing non-linguistic reality. Third, doing comes before saying; knowledge is a component of agency, and competency is *demonstrated* in what we *do* rather than (merely) what we say.[[21]](#footnote-21) The pragmatist replaces the representationalist’s theoretical tools with concepts such as linguistic function, expressive role, practical implications, and inferential relations. The pragmatist isn’t particularly concerned with explaining how disputants are speaking truthfully, instead they hope to capture the significance of what disputants are doing. The pragmatist doesn't reject the concept of ‘truth’ altogether, but assigns it a less important role in philosophical theorizing.[[22]](#footnote-22) To paraphrase Rorty, the pragmatist accepts that statements are true, but they avoid saying anything further about how the “making true gets done.” In other words, ‘truth’ and its ilk do not play any significant explanatory role – the pragmatist is not concerned with explaining how speakers could be speaking truthfully, specified independent of the speaker’s mental states themselves. Shields (2020) suggests that topic continuity is a matter of how speakers treat each other and their utterances. In other words, semantic competency is a species of practical know-how: we know how to speak grammatically before we can state what the relevant grammatical rules are (know that).

Frist, the pragmatist approach avoids taking a stand on contentious philosophical concepts such as ‘truth’, ‘meaning’, and ‘reference.’ On the pragmatist model, language is not a word-world relation. Instead, language is fundamentally a social practice, or language game. Communication is a continually mutually reinforcing process: participation in a community just *is* being recognized by others as playing the same game – and vice versa. Pragmatists are not in the business of explaining what “makes” something true because they do not assume that declarations or assertions involve a word-world relation that holds independently of the speakers’ mental states. For example, according to an inferentialist, assertions aren’t the representation of non-linguistic reality, but rather the sorts of speech acts that can play the role of premises and conclusions in an argument; assertions stand in need of defense and can be challenged (assertions serve as challenges, as well). It may be the case that in a particular language game the sorts of sentences that play the role of premises and conclusions are representational; in that case, we’d develop a representationalist semantics on a pragmatist bedrock. Semantic concepts like ‘meaning’, ‘reference’, and ‘truth’ get purchase *within* a living language game, not as theoretical posits to explain the practice itself. It may be the case that the best philosophical explanation of a particular language game appeals to ‘truth’ or ‘reference’, but not as universally valid explanatory concepts.

As a reminder, for the semantic approach aesthetic disagreement requires explaining how disputants could be speaking truthfully, which invites accounts of meaning and/or reference that can come apart from what the disputants themselves are aware of or sensitive to. For the pragmatist, it is a matter of (practical) competency, which means we need other people to be justified, at all. On the pragmatist model the target explanandum is characterized as an *activity*: what we care about is what we’re doing, the role of the expressions, and the practical implications of our thought and talk. Here, for example, knowledge is recast not as justified true belief, but as a socially conferred entitlement: one has knowledge when one’s interlocuters do not challenge what one says and modify what they say and do accordingly. Justification as entitlement always stands in (potential) in need of defense because others must *acknowledge* the speaker as entitled to what has been claimed, but what this involves will depend on the contours of the particular disagreement (or aesthetic practice). On this model linguistic or aesthetic competency is marked by one’s ability to demonstrate entitlement to what they claim, which can vary depending on the audience and context. For example, consider the differences in what sorts of claims one takes to be permissible when discussing ‘free will’ with one’s non-academic family versus another philosopher. In the latter case, one might be exceedingly shrewder on what sorts of claims are permitted. Justification is not a property that holds when one has the right relation to the world, instead it is socially conferred by others.

Second, the pragmatist is well-positioned to endorse pluralism about aesthetic disagreement. Theorizing about what features disputants take to bear on justification in each exchange will involve locating what *counts* as justification from within that language game. This way our philosophical explanations do not stray too far from the concrete activity that first attracted us. The pragmatist approach entails that if aesthetic disagreement is an inherently social practice, which entails that justification and truth are essentially public, in that others acknowledge us as justified or as speaking truthfully. Justification, truth, and the like are socially conferred, through others’ practical attitudes: taking or treating us as justified (not a relationship between utterances or mental states and the world). Thus, it is not up to a speaker to determine the justificatory status of their utterance, because justification is dependent on being recognized as such by others. Aesthetic disagreements are pervasive and important because we *need* other people to acknowledge what we do as justified, as permissible. Others help us work out the practical and conceptual implications or our aesthetic beliefs and commitments, and the implications of what others’ do on “our” thought and talk. This is where the normative force originates – taking ourselves to be accountable to each other for what we claim or say. The pragmatist replaces convergence with mutual accountability. On this model, to have expertise is to be publicly acknowledged as having a higher degree of entitlement to one’s aesthetic claimings, it is the capacity to “get away with” more than the non-experts. Aesthetic competency is like grammatical competency, in that we are competent at speaking grammatically before we can state or explain the grammatical rules. We don’t need to “know” the grammatical rules in order to be a competent speaker. Further, grammatical rules are open-textured and up for negotiation, and there can be multiple operating at once such that it might be genuinely undetermined what word to use in a given context.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Third, the pragmatist avoids commitments to contentious metaphysical phenomena, but is not necessarily an anti-realist about aesthetic properties or objects. Once we give up the assumption that language is fundamentally in the business of describing, representing, or referring to some non-linguistic stuff “out there” in the world, we are not burdened with specifying what that stuff “really” is or whether speakers could know anything about it. This also helps dissolve the puzzles that arise from the gap between what determines the content of our sentences and what we can know or control. Propositional contents (and mental contents) are defined by their communicative role, something that is (at least in principle) does not require any special training to access. Further, the semantic approach assumes that the goal of disagreement is convergence on the truth of a single proposition. However, recent work on the nature of aesthetic testimony suggests that aesthetic judgements aren’t the sort of thing we should expector wantto have identical contents, anyway. On C. Thi Nguyen’s (2019) “striving” account of aesthetic engagement, the point of aesthetic engagement is not simply to collect true beliefs about an artwork or art practice, else we would just defer to whatever the experts and other sophisticated people say. Nguyen argues that we value the very *activity* of engaging with artworks, *striving* to identify and interpret their important features or decode their hidden meanings, not just securing the epistemic bag. Nguyen would agree that aesthetic disagreement is akin to playing a game: in each case we commit ourselves to certain rules or constraints because we value the *activity* of working through those constraints towards a goal, even if we do not actually achieve it.

What matters is not so much whether we get it right (to the extent that such a thing is possible) but the *commitment* that explains why we disagree at all, our willingness to defend our aesthetic judgements to others, to engage in disagreements, and our avoidance to forming judgements merely on the basis of another’s testimony. It’s a matter of aesthetic accountability, responsibility, and commitment. For Nguyen, the point of an aesthetic engagement is to get our aesthetic judgments about a work or what-have-you “right”, but it isn’t *just* about getting it right. The desire to “get it right” generates the constraints that govern our first-order aesthetic engagement. This is why we enjoy the *process* of getting it right and not merely the goal, which also explains why we don’t just defer to aesthetic experts but take time and effort trying to figure it out, as well as our tendency to end up in aesthetic disagreements. Thus, aesthetic engagement exhibits genuine normative force when it is governed by the desire to understand a work’s aesthetic meaning, not because it results in a true belief about its meaning.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On the pragmatist model, ‘aesthetic disagreement’ refers to a joint activity between two or more people that is best explained by the participants’ assumption of mutual (aesthetic) accountability – one cannot publicly declare “Danzig II sucks” without a willingness to defend their judgement. However, in some cases what appears to be a disagreement is really an opportunity to share aesthetic judgements, or bond (the communal model).[[25]](#footnote-25) There are good reasons to distinguish encounters that merely *appear* to have normative force like matters of taste, but agreement is not the only method we have for doing so.[[26]](#footnote-26) If the point of the interchange is best explained in terms of expressing, sharing, or communicating aesthetic sensibilities or values, or if the point isn’t to address how “we” ought think and talk, then we can safely set it aside when looking for insight into the nature of aesthetic disagreement. We are now left with a *broader* and more *diverse* diet of examples to help us understand the peculiar nature of aesthetic value.

Fourth, the pragmatist prioritizes the social and historical dimensions of language, which is compatible with externalism about propositional content. It's important to clarify that the pragmatist is not a subjectivist or internalist about propositional content. For example, an inferentialist semantics can accommodate the externalist’s intuitions that meaning “ain’t in the head” because others play an essential role in determining the propositional content (i.e., the inferential implications) of what we do and say. In most cases, we are not fully aware of what we are committed to when we use a term or concept. For example, in picking up a horse-shaped chess piece I am committed to there being a set of permissible and impermissible moves, even if I am not aware of all the moves in that set. Likewise, in claiming that a particular performance is impressionistic, I am also committed to it being *not* *realistic*. Someone is entitled to object if I make a claim that commits me to incompatible propositions. When it comes to aesthetic disagreement, others help us recognize what we are *already* committed to by questioning, correcting, challenging, acknowledging, or sanctioning what we do or say. The historicity of aesthetic expressions is exhausted by the role of externalist factors like past chains of use or actual referents, which is to say from the point of view of any individual speaker, the contents of their terms are (presently) fixed. This semantic conception of conceptual content makes it difficult to explain the ways in which aesthetic practices (as well as reference or meaning) can change and evolve, particularly given the transgressive nature of art kinds and traditions. That is to say, art kinds, like natural kinds, are *historical*: what an aesthetic practice or tradition *is* depends not only on what it *has been* but also what it *will be*.[[27]](#footnote-27) Part of the problem is that semantic views are encouraged to antecedently specify the conditions or properties that individuate an aesthetic practice or art kind in order to account for all the ways speakers can competently talk aboutthem and the aesthetic qualities of any of their requisite works. We can still be externalists because content is external to any *one* person’s mental states: one cannot wear cowboy boots on stage and compel others to acknowledge them as a competent ballet dancer. In our explanation for the validity of what we are *doing* we demonstrate a concern with being correct, a responsibility to each other that usually but not necessarily requires careful attention to the world.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Consequently, the pragmatist doesn’t treat disagreement as a problem to be solved or resolved. Or, at least, it isn’t something we ought to be worried about – disagreement is a natural consequence of aesthetic democracy, integrity, and agency. Disagreement is a distinctly *normative* practice that necessarily involves the other participants in the exchange; justification is *conferred* by others when they recognize the asserter as entitled to what they’ve claimed – they modify what they take to be permissible going forward. In fact, disagreements nicely demonstrate the idea that justification is a matter of socially conferred entitlements, not a state determined by an individual’s relationship to non-linguistic reality. Disagreements are the “challenge and assess” dimension of discursive practices, and assertions are *targeted*: they aim to *address* their audience and as such are essentially second-personal.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is imperative for one’s audience to recognize or respond to our claims as having normative force, rather than as nonsense or mere noise.

However, the pragmatist does not jettison the notion of meaning altogether because propositional content is a two-way street. Disputants are always already in a process of determining what their words mean at the same time they are discovering what they are committed to when they use an expression like ‘graceful’ or ‘impressionistic’. Within an aesthetic practice, such as comic books appreciators and creators, participants will have background familiarity with the permissible moves, or expressions, defenses, and so on. Others’ expectations are still fluid and dynamic, but they put pressure on speakers to either conform to the dominant use or be prepared to defend themselves if and when challenged. If we cannot adequately defend our claim, we are no longer entitled to it, our status as a source of aesthetic information, a peer, can be brought into question. Consequently, the value of an aesthetic disagreement is not found in *agreement* or securing true beliefs but is found in the very activity of demonstrating that we are entitled to our aesthetic judgements, why others *should* *care* and modify their behavior accordingly. Disagreements are local pockets of collaborative aesthetic investigation: collective strivings grounded in a mutual recognition of accountability, where participants do not want to merely defer to each other in order to “win” or get it over with.[[30]](#footnote-30) On the pragmatist model, disagreements reveal that aesthetic traditions are not just a collection of people and items that share some property or essence but an ever-evolving social practice.

In the second section I argued that the traditional semantic approach invites philosophical problems because the semanticist’s theoretical tools are unlikely to capture what disputants care about when they engage in disagreement. Correctness is a matter of having *and* grasping the correct relationship to those properties. In this section, I have suggested that the pragmatist recasts disagreement in normative terms, whereby truth, meaning, and justification are matters of socially conferred entitlements rather than independently specifiable properties. The pragmatist framework does a better job at capturing what’s distinctive about aesthetic kinds and concepts: the social origin of their normativity.

Conclusion: Objections and the Path Forward

So, where are we? We began by noting the diversity, ubiquity, pervasiveness, and significance of aesthetic disagreements, before challenging the traditional semantic approach philosophers adopt to explain aesthetic disagreements. At this point, one might raise the following objection to my pragmatist model of aesthetic disagreement. Though I claim to be recasting disagreement from semantic terms into a pragmatist key, it could well be the case that disagreements are essentially or irreducibly semantic. If this is true, then I am conceptually engineering the concept of ‘aesthetic disagreement’ itself. Conceptual engineering is the activity of diagnosing defective concepts and offering revised concepts to improve how we “think and talk.” Philosophers that adopt the semantic approach are describing the nature of aesthetic disagreement, and discovering its essential features (e.g., speaking truthfully, blamelessness, and so on). Whereas I am re-defining aesthetic disagreement as a practical activity and suggesting that ‘truth’, ‘meaning’, and justification’ should be understood as socially conferred statuses. Though semanticists like Lopes speak *as if* what they are doing is merely reporting facts about a natural phenomenon, it isn’t given or obvious whether aesthetic disagreement is “really” a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon. In fact, according to David Chalmers 2020 most philosophy is either conceptual re-engineering (revising existing concepts) or “de novo” conceptual engineering (introducing new concepts). As such, the pragmatist is not engaging in conceptual engineering any more (or less) than the semanticist. In either case, philosophers are proposing a view of how we ought to “think and talk” given what we care about: explaining the reality of aesthetic disagreement. For the semanticist, this involves explaining how disputants could be speaking truthfully, for the pragmatist, it involves vindicating their practical significance.

I am not suggesting that we ought to prioritize pragmatic approaches wholesale (at least, not in this paper). Perhaps it’s better to say I am weakening the semantic priority thesis rather than cutting through the semantic/pragmatic distinction altogether. My overall goal is to show that the semantic priority thesis is important but contingent, and there are other viable options like pragmatism, that might avoid some of the puzzles that bog down semantics-first views. Such an approach lets us better capture the sorts of disagreements that play such a significant role in our aesthetic and social lives more generally. My overall point is not that we should do less theorizing, but *more* and *different* theorizing; not just linguistics but also sociology, and history, and cultural studies – the historical processes that give rise to our art institutions and practices such that it could be a genuine question whether a urinal *could be a* good artwork.

Many philosophers of art embrace the idea that aesthetic value is grounded in social practices, but they have overlooked the ways in which the semantic approach limits theorizing about aesthetic normativity. For example, debates about cultural appropriation have shifted from a descriptivist or property-based view – that it has to do with intentions or features of the object - to explicitly social views: explaining the harms of appropriation in terms of intimacy and entitlements.[[31]](#footnote-31) The pragmatist model could help bolster cross-cultural approaches, because it endorses pluralism about justification; if justification is socially conferred then it matters who we recognize as authoritative. Historical continuity is an important tool for defending claims of reparation, and we need a framework that doesn’t take an antecedent stand on the *form* of that historical trajectory. Aesthetic value is instituted in the world in virtue of our attitudes toward each other as well as the artifactual items that play certain roles in our social practices. It is rather uncontroversial to hold that a competent aesthetic judgement or assertion requires conforming to practice-relevant rules and norms, which are external to the performing agent. Which features matter, what one appeals to in justifying their judgement are practice or genre-relative, but aesthetic agents can still go wrong in their aesthetic judgements because others treat or take them to be wrong.

According to the pragmatist anyone can, at least in principle, have aesthetic expertise, and can be an expert in one community while not in another, which could help explain cases of aesthetic testimonial injustice. The pragmatist can acknowledge that aesthetic normativity is a historical and dynamic matter because it is instituted through social practices, through processes of mutual recognition. The “back and forth” striving activity of an aesthetic disagreement presupposes mutual recognition (e.g., mutual attribution of competency and commitment). One’s status *as* entitled to a particular claim is dependent it being acknowledged by others as such.[[32]](#footnote-32) When we make assertions, we are aiming to be recognized as entitled to them by those they come into contact with and that we recognize as having some sort of authority or “say so” in the appropriate assessment of *our* claiming (peer, expert, etc.). The social significance of what I claim, what I am in fact committed to when I say a work is ‘derivative’ is not simply “up to me”. In attributing the claim to me, by acknowledging me as *entitled* to what I have asserted, others thereby adapt their performances such that they do not conflict with what I have said. Through this I am recognized as a genuine *participant* in the exchange, at the same time my acknowledgement of others, presupposed in my addressing them, (re)instates their statuses as participants. This all happens whether or not everyone ends up acknowledging what I’ve said as settling the matter. In this picture, that we need our speech and creative performances to be recognized as meaningful by others we recognize as authoritative *constrains* what we can meaningfully say and do. This is where the external authority of aesthetic normativity gets its grip.

Consider again the pervasive, familiar, and ubiquitous disagreements we encounter online and outside the movie theater. Aesthetic disagreement isn’t valuable because it supports diversity and personality: it is simply a natural consequence of the essentially social nature of aesthetic value. A thoroughly pragmatic account of aesthetic disagreement will reject any antecedently privileged interpretative framework (and its corresponding metaphysical, epistemological, methodological commitments), allowing us to better understand to the varieties of collective valuings we encounter. Terms like ‘meaning’, ‘true’, and ‘refers’ operate as currency within forms of aesthetic life, which is to say that representational talk is fine and good once it is thoroughly *socialized*: understood as meaningful only *within* up-and-running aesthetic practices, not as theoretical primitives that *explain* the practice itself. Competent speakers have to conform to public rules in order to be recognized as playing the same gameas those they address or acknowledge as their (aesthetic peers) – and this is what serves as the basis for communication and the origin of aesthetic authority. The pragmatist approach helps capture why members of a forum dedicated to Bob Dylan would revel in unending but low-stakes disagreements: it’s part and parcel of being a member of an aesthetic community and caring about aesthetic value. Others treat us as competent by engaging with our claims (even if to disagree or challenge us), and that affirms that “we” are “in this together.”

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1. For example, we can disagree about a work’s correct genre or category, aesthetic merit, comparative evaluations about different works by the same artist, or in a particular genre. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=104489>, which begins with “For the sake of argument…” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=104447 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Which asks respondents to pick ten Dylan songs that would constitute torture in hell https://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=104405 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Liao et al have used empirical data to argue that art concepts – particularly categorical ones – exhibit the structure of a “dual-character concept”. Subjects were asked to judge the meaningfulness of sentences of the form, “Yes I know that Koons’ *Balloon* *Dog* is art but it isn’t *really* art.” The idea being that a large set of concepts that we use to classify social roles admit of both descriptive and prescriptive criteria of application. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://expectingrain.com/discussions/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=103786 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Riggle (2021) has proposed a “communitarian” view of aesthetic discourse that rejects the norm of convergence. For Riggle, the point of an aesthetic disagreement is to mutually appreciate each other’s individual preferences, or “vibe.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Some say incompatibility is marked by the felicitous of denial in the implicated or intended content (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Lopes, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The incompatibility assumption is inherited from classical logic (and formal semantics). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/bvcz0e/danzig_4_is_a_great_album_its_not_all_about/> see also <https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/vxq780/danzig_i_iv/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I take it any account that adopts truth-conditional semantics endorses the semantic priority thesis. Lopes (2018) provides a rather comprehensive list of philosophers that conform to the semantic priority thesis. This includes relativist semantics (Kölbel 2003; Kölbel 2004; Lasersohn 2005; Kölbel 2008; MacFarlane 2005; Stephenson 2007; García-Carpintero and Kölbel 2008; Egan, 2010; Brogaard 2017). Indexicalist or perspectivist (Beardsley 1983; López de Sa 2007; Sundell 2011; Barker 2013; Mole 2016; Davies, 2017; Lopes 2017b, 2018, Sundell 2017; see also Wright 2010). Hybrid-expressivist views like Marques (2016), or pluralist like Noë (2015) fair better insofar as they are not compelled to antecedently specify the relevant semantic properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Evnine 2015. Work on the nature of faultless disagreement is largely motivated by concerns with the semantics of subjective expressions; see for example, Zeman 2020 or Wyatt 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lopes is sort of a borderline case because he does recognize that aesthetic disagreement involves “working out” a practices aesthetic profile but he then characterizes it in terms of getting the profile “correct.” Focusing on his view would take us too far off topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. E.g., aesthetic properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I’m not convinced that successful aesthetic disagreements must be resolved. For example, user Robot\_Jox concludes a disagreement over the HBO show *Succession* as such: “agree to disagree! i think the next episode will test our takes!...it’s cool that we can come to such different conclusions with the same information. good show!” <https://www.avclub.com/succession-review-season-4-episode-2-rehearsal-1850281823#replies> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Semantic approaches often operate with the default assumption that language serves the primary or singular purpose of describing non-linguistic reality. Alternatively, we can be pluralists about linguistic function and recognize that language plays multiple legitimate roles, description being one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Faultless disputes arise when disputants take themselves to be committed to incompatible states of the world, but not because they have been otherwise negligent or careless. The need to classify faultless disagreements is driven by concerns with the semantics of taste predicates. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Externalists hold that things like past chains of use, metaphysical naturalness, and the judgements of experts determine the content of our expressions. Cappelen (2018) argues that conceptual engineering, the intentional revision of the meaning of our terms or expressions, is impossible because most of the metasemantic factors that determine meaning are beyond anyone’s control. If any one person could modify semantic meaning, meaning would be arbitrary or trivial. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For example, if we take aesthetic concepts to be partitions of logical space, we must explain how everyday speakers could be sensitive to something like segments of logical space, and why disagreeing over partitions of logical space *matters*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I am not denying that semantic meaning, truth, or conceptual function cannot play a legitimate role in explaining aesthetic disagreement, but I am deeply skeptical about approaching aesthetic disagreements with such a narrow set of philosophical tools. Many of the problems facing semantic views could be avoided if they present themselves as engaged in a normative rather than descriptive project, also avoids an infinite regress of “meta”-aesthetic disagreement. I consider this point in the conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I am not endorsing instrumentalism about truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Pragmatism is compatible with realism, although it differs from “heavyweight” realist views which take the existence of properties to *explain* the truth of propositions. This is why I prefer to cast the distinction as “semantic” and “pragmatist” rather than “realist” and “anti-realist.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For example, in light of technological developments for a period of time it was undetermined whether the word ‘book’ applied to e-books. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In his 2022, Nguyen argues that the effort required to engage in aesthetic appreciation is underwritten by trust. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This is drawing on Matt Strohl’s (2022) work on affective communities. We can diagnose a community or engagement as sharing rather than engaging if it is the case that the community is organized around a norm of sharing aesthetic judgements or demonstrating their appreciation for some aesthetic tradition, etc. Such communities will sanction speakers that attempt to instigate an aesthetic disagreement, such as banning them from the Facebook group. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The convergence principle has also recently come under scrutiny by Nick Riggle (2021). Riggle proposes a communitarian model of aesthetic value, where the point of aesthetic disagreement is mutual appreciation of individuality, or “vibing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For example, the genre ‘mockumentary’ of which films like This is Spinal Tap are included can only be understood in relation to the dominant genre of documentary. It would not seem aesthetically meaningful to produce a fake documentary in 1950. In fact, one can recognize the familiar semantic puzzles arise in the “fiction/nonfiction” divide in the philosophy of documentary because documentaries are taken to function like cinematic assertions, understood semantically. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Note that the pragmatist need not be an anti-realist. What the pragmatist rejects is a pre-theoretical conception of non-linguistic reality as something “out there” that determines the content of what we say. Further, the pragmatist does not endorse the explanatory schema entailed by classical realism, where concepts like ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ play an important explanatory role (which also jettisons the need to posit truth-makers). Sentences are still true, and chairs are real, it’s just that we are not compelled to explain why. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Wanderer 2010, p.101. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cf. Lopes 2018: “aesthetic disputes are to be overcome, not embraced” (166). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Strohl and Nguyen 2019, Matthes 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In this model it is true that one could be massively mistaken about the relevant aesthetic values but only in a context where one’s audience is just as ignorant. There you would be entitled to claims that, transplanted to the “big city” so to speak, or by speakers in the future, would be challenged or dismissed. This is not a problem for the pragmatist but does highlight the importance of exposure and access to the rights sorts of communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)