

Real Objective Beauty

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Once we have distinguished between beauty and aesthetic value, we are faced with the question of whether beauty is a thing of value in itself. A number of theorists have suggested that the answer might be no. They have thought that the pursuit of beauty is just the indulgence of one particular taste: a taste that has, for contingent historical reasons, been privileged. This paper attempts to resist a line of thought that leads to that conclusion. It does so by arguing that there really are objective facts about beauty. To do this, the paper draws distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, and between realism and anti-realism. It argues that, regarding attributions of beauty, we should be realists and objectivists. This is shown to be compatible with taking the semantic content of such attributions to vary between contexts. This form of context sensitivity is able to account of those features of beauty-attributions that have been taken as evidence for its subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Artists and critics have often been suspicious of beauty, as being too much a matter of arbitrary and superficial charm. Their suspicions set the tone for a significant part of late twentieth-century aesthetics.¹ By reminding us that many beautiful things are not works of art and that many works of art have values that do not require them to be beautiful, they led us to draw a distinction between beauty and aesthetic value. Having drawn that distinction, we were left with the question of whether there is any reason to regard beauty itself as a thing of value. The present essay is intended to block a line of thought that suggests not.

The line of thought that I want to block says that the pursuit of beauty can only be the indulgence of a taste for experiences of one particular sort. It suggests that a person who seeks experiences of beauty does something that is no more valuable than the person who seeks to satisfy a preference. Some of us go in for the pursuit of beauty. Others are enthusiastic about the non-aesthetic properties of fast cars and spicy curries. The inclination to say that some of these pursuits are more valuable than others is taken by this line of thought to be a symptom of certain facts—most of them regrettable—concerning the privileges that have historically been in the hands of powerful and affluent groups.²

1 See, for example, Alexander Nehamas, 'The Return of the Beautiful: Morality, Pleasure, and the Value of Uncertainty', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000), 393–403; Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, rev. edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

This idea that a love of beauty is the indulgence of a privileged taste sits at one end of a spectrum. At the other extreme is the idea that the valuing of beauty is on a par with the valuing of truth. Since nobody who has a mind can avoid the formation of beliefs, and since the formation of beliefs already puts one in a position where falsity will be a kind of failure, the valuing of truth is in some way unavoidable. We are not obliged to maximize the number of truths that we believe, but we cannot avoid being in a position where truth is among the values to which we are committed. The view that I wish to advocate says that, because the mind is not just a hoard of sentences, truth is not the only standard against which a mind's engagement with the world is to be judged. Alongside the unavoidable obligation to believe the truth there is, on this view, an unavoidable obligation to love the beautiful. We are not obliged to love *everything* beautiful, any more than we are obliged to believe every truth or to do every good. We would nonetheless be going wrong if we failed to count beauty among the values to which we are committed.

Between the view according to which the pursuit of beauty is an unavoidable obligation and the view according to which it is an arbitrarily privileged indulgence, there are any number of intermediate positions. An argument against one of these extremes need not oblige us to accept the other. I nonetheless suspect that, if positions at the indulgence end of this spectrum have seemed plausible, it is largely because positions at the obligation end have seemed untenable—despite the existence of a long tradition in which they have been favoured.³ Believing the truth can be an accomplishment only because there is a kind of failure—the believing of a falsehood—that a believer of truth successfully avoids. Because beauty has been thought to lack objective or realist credentials, it has been thought that there is no analogous possibility of failure in the aesthetic case: the denial of objective realism removes the possibility of our finding the *wrong* things to be beautiful; and so, since there is no failure to be avoided, there is no success to be achieved. It has therefore seemed that beauty could not possibly place us under an obligation, because it has seemed that nothing objective could be at stake when beauty is being disputed.

There are two ways in which this challenge to the obligation view of beauty can be developed. The first emphasizes the idea that claims about beauty should be given an *anti-realist* interpretation. It says that there are no facts about beauty that could place us under any sort of obligation. The second emphasizes the idea that claims about beauty are *subjective*. It says that there may be facts about beauty, but they could not place a substantive obligation on us. Rejecting these ideas will give us the result that beauty is *real* and *objective*. This is compatible with maintaining that attributions of beauty are nonetheless *context-sensitive*. This paper concludes by considering how an account of this context-sensitivity might be developed, so as to be consistent with the claim that beauty does place us under a genuine obligation.

2. Realism

The Difficulties of Motivating Anti-Realism

Anti-realism about some discourse is the thesis that the norm constitutively governing that discourse is not a truth-based norm. This thesis can come in various forms. We meet one form

3 John Cottingham, 'Human Nature and the Transcendent', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 70 (2012), 233–254.

of anti-realism in meta-ethics, when it is suggested that the utterances made in our moral discourse should be evaluated, not as true or false, but as conveying emotions of approval or preference.⁴ We meet a different form of anti-realism in debates about the nature of science. There the anti-realist's claim is that utterances made by a scientist should be evaluated, not as true or false, but as if they were being told to an audience that takes the speaker to be giving a model with which to make accurate predictions about observable occurrences.⁵

An anti-realist about beauty might follow either of these precedents. If they follow the first then they will claim that the person who says a thing is beautiful is giving voice to the gratifying nature of her experience of that thing, rather than asserting a belief about it. If they follow the second then they will claim that the person who says that a thing is beautiful is making a move within the special language game that is aesthetic discourse. Various theories have been given of the rules by which that language game operates. Anti-realists who have been influenced by the French deconstructivist tradition claim that the aesthetic discourse is one in which various identities are performed, or in which various power negotiations are transacted,⁶ but anti-realism does not, in itself, require that we endorse a deconstructionist theory concerning the norms governing aesthetic discourse, nor that we give any other positive theory about those norms. It requires only that we *deny* that the norms governing this discourse are the usual truth-based ones.

Such a denial would not be entailed by the claim that the vocabulary of beauty is *sometimes* used for non-truth-stating purposes. That much would be unremarkable. If Smith shows Jones a photograph of his newborn baby then there is every chance that Jones will respond by remarking that the baby is beautiful. This may be an expression of sympathy, rather than the assertion of any belief about the infant's aesthetic properties. Such uses of the word 'beautiful' do not reveal anything of immediate philosophical consequence. If Jones asks how Smith is doing then Smith will very probably reply that he is 'fine, thank you'. This too may not be the assertion of a belief. The fact that the language of beauty is *sometimes* used in phatic contexts no more establishes anti-realism about beauty than does the phatic use of 'fine, thank you' establish anti-realism about personal wellness. The aesthetic anti-realist needs to claim, not merely that beauty-talk is sometimes used to transact business other than the making of assertions, but that such talk is essentially unsuitable for the transaction of straightforwardly assertoric business. Analogously, the philosophically interesting forms of scientific anti-realism claim not that scientific language is *sometimes* used to transact non-rational forms of persuasion—of course it is—but that the language of our scientific theorizing is essentially disqualified from straightforwardly assertoric use (perhaps because it has no application to observables). It is only when anti-realism is formulated in this way that it threatens to rob us of aesthetic facts, thereby making the obligation view of beauty untenable.

Because the anti-realist's claims are stronger than any claim about the way in which our aesthetic vocabulary is sometimes used, they can receive only weak support from the observation of its use on particular occasions. Such observations may support the claim that

4 Mark Schroeder, *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008); Dorit Bar-On and Matthew Chrisman, 'Ethical Neo-Expressivism', in Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 132–165.

5 Bas C. Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: OUP, 1980).

6 Bourdieu, *La distinction*; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

a lot of our aesthetic discourse is concerned with non-cognitive display, rather than with assertion. One might even maintain that some element of non-cognitive display is essential to our aesthetic discourse, since there is a sense in which that discourse would lose its purpose if none of its participants had been moved by the things about which they are talking. Neither of these points would be sufficient to establish the anti-realist's claim about aesthetic vocabulary being essentially unsuited to the stating of facts. In considering whether to accept or reject that claim we need arguments, not just examples. In the following subsection, I develop one argument for thinking that the anti-realist's claim is mistaken.

An Argument for Realism

The obligation view of beauty requires there to be facts about beauty. If there are to be such facts, then they had better be the things that we are talking about when using cognates of the word 'beauty'. To argue that such talk is indeed concerned with facts, we need to show that the speaker who applies the word 'beauty' to an object thereby gives voice to a *belief* that the object is beautiful, rather than expressing some non-constative attitude towards it. We can do this by considering the way in which sentences that attribute beauty can be used in the formulation of a Moore-paradox, as in sentence 1:

- (1) This object is beautiful, and I do not believe this object is beautiful.

Speakers who utter sentence (1) whilst having some particular object in mind will not have asserted a contradiction. It is nonetheless clear that something will have gone rationally wrong with their assertions: a case in which sentence (1) was asserted in good faith would be paradoxical in just the way that Moore identified (and that Wittgenstein puzzled over).⁷ It would be paradoxical in just the way that sentences of the form 'P and I do not believe that P' typically are.

Sentence (1) contrasts, in this regard, with sentence (2), in which the denial of belief has been replaced by the disavowal of some other attitude, of a sort that does not involve belief:

- (2) This object is beautiful, and it fails to move me (in the way typical of beautiful things).

There are various ways in which we might characterize the non-constative 'moving' that the second conjunct of sentence (2) mentions. However we characterize it, the utterance of sentence (2) will be without the paradoxical implications of sentence (1). A sentence such as (2) can be asserted quite naturally, provided only that the attitude mentioned in its second conjunct is a genuinely non-constative one. That sentence might, for example, describe one feature of a sullen mood. Hamlet's 'What a piece of work is a man' speech illustrates this:

What a piece of work is a man! ... The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me. No, nor woman neither... (*Hamlet*, 2.2.286–291)

7 G. E. Moore, 'A Reply to My Critics', in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1942), 535–667; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §2.

At this point, Hamlet has ceased to make a display of his antic-disposition. He is revealing his sanity and insight by giving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a straight account of how it is that he has been feeling. Nothing is rationally amiss in this speech, either pragmatically or logically, but the anti-realists cannot account for its unparadoxical intelligibility. For them an utterance like Hamlet's should have the ring of paradox, whereas a sentence like (1) should at worst be pragmatically awkward when it is uttered in the context of a conversation. This gets things the wrong way around.

Sentences of the form 'P, and I don't believe that P' are paradoxical (whether they occur in conversational contexts or in the context of an internal monologue) just when their first conjunct is the expression of a belief. Since these sentences do have the ring of paradox when they concern beauty, utterances of 'This object is beautiful' should be construed as expressions of belief. They should therefore be construed as being subject to a truth-involving norm. And to take them in that way is to take their subject matter realistically. This blocks one line of thought that might have seemed to make aesthetic *facts* superfluous.

Although we should resist the aesthetic anti-realist's denial of there being any facts about beauty, we can do this while remaining sceptical about a lot of what goes on when beauty is spoken of. People who make attributions of beauty may sometimes by giving voice to a gratifying experience, just as they are sometimes expressing sympathy, sometimes showing off, and sometimes engaging in social positioning of the sort that Bourdieu theorized. If this were all that they ever did then there would be no need to postulate facts by which their utterances are made true. The obligation view of beauty would then be untenable, and its defender would be the victim of a socially entrenched bluff; but so pessimistic an interpretation could not account for the fact that Moore sentences have their usual ring of paradox when they concern beauty. The claims made in the first conjunct of those sentences do seem to express beliefs. Since they are therefore apt for evaluation against a standard given by aesthetic facts, there is nothing here to suggest that the postulation of such facts is otiose. The degree of scepticism that the aesthetic discourse warrants is not so great as to point us away from the obligation view of beauty, nor towards the indulgence view.

3. Subjectivity

The idea that facts about beauty place us under an obligation requires there to be such facts, and so requires that our discourse about beauty be given a realist construal (such as the previous section defended). It also requires that those facts not be entirely subjective ones. If the fact that a thing is beautiful were merely a fact about the way in which that thing strikes us, then aesthetic facts could not themselves place any constraint on the ways in which we ought to be struck. This point might be put in Wittgensteinian tones: 'One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right".'⁸

If this problem is to be avoided then the obligation view of beauty will need aesthetic facts to be somewhat independent of our responses. Such independence could be assured if the aesthetic facts were objective, but it is often supposed that they are not. We see one

8 Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations', §258.

example of this towards the beginning of a recent encyclopaedia article concerning judgements of taste, in which Nick Zangwill treats the subjectivity of beauty as if it were an uncontroversial starting point. Zangwill writes that:

The first necessary condition of a judgment of taste is that it is essentially *subjective*. What this means is that the judgment of taste is based on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. It is this that distinguishes a judgment of taste from an empirical judgment. Central examples of judgments of taste are judgments of beauty and ugliness.⁹

In order to assess this widely shared assumption, we need to consider what it is for a judgement to be subjective, and how it is that subjectivity contrasts with objectivity. Some philosophers have been wary of this contrast; having noted that when ‘objective’ is used as a term of epistemic commendation, the effects of its use can sometimes be oppressive.¹⁰ This should not lead us to ignore the distinction between subjective and objective properties. We should mark that distinction in order that we can be cautious about misuses of the rhetoric that is associated with it.

When asking whether a property is subjective, it is helpful to consider a sentence referring to a judgement in which that property is attributed to something in particular. In the case of beauty, this means that we should consider a sentence with the form of (3):

(3) Jones judges Smith to be beautiful.

It is an elementary grammatical point that Jones is the *subject* of this sentence and Smith its *object*. In accordance with this point, I use ‘subject’ throughout the discussion that follows to refer to the person who forms a judgement, and ‘object’ to refer to the thing, things, persons, or events about which that judgement is made. This makes our basic notion of subjectivity easy to state: *subjective* judgements are made true, in part, by the properties of their *subjects*.

We can illustrate this notion with some examples, before saying something more precise about it. For one example, consider the property of *being worrisome*. In order for Jones to be accurate when judging Smith to be worrisome, it is necessary for Jones—the subject—to be prone to the forming of Smith-related worries. A demand is therefore placed on the *subject* of a worrisomeness judgement, in the sense that the truth of that judgement constrains the intrinsic properties of its subject. More specifically, the truth of this judgement requires something on the part of its subject that its falsity would not. It is this subject-side requirement that makes the property of being worrisome a subjective one.

Some demands will always be placed on the subject of a judgement merely by the *making* of that judgement, whether or not the content judged is true. These are not enough to render the judgement’s content subjective. The making of a true judgement requires the subject to be in possession of concepts that are adequate to the expression of the

9 Nick Zangwill, ‘Aesthetic Judgment’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/aesthetic-judgment/>> accessed July 2015.

10 See, for example, Nina Gregg, ‘Reflections on the Feminist Critique of Objectivity’, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 11 (1987), 8–18; and Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge: Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 138–163.

proposition judged, but the making of a false judgement with that content would make just the same conceptual demands. The meeting of these demands is not a constraint on the subject in the sense that concerns us here. A property is subjective, in the sense that we have just sketched, only if the intrinsic constraints placed on the subject are specific to that property's *truthful* attribution.

The property of being worrisome is subjective because true attributions of worrisomeness make intrinsic demands on their subjects. Similar things can be said about the property of being *charming*, or the property of being *familiar*. If judgements attributing any of these properties are true then they will be made true, in part, by features of the one who does the judging. When Zangwill writes that beauty is subjective because its attributions are based on their subjects' feelings of pleasure, it seems to be something like this notion of subjectivity that he has in mind.

Subjective properties contrast with objective ones. Whereas true attributions of subjective properties place demands on the intrinsic properties of the attributing subject, the true attribution of an objective property does not. It places demands (although perhaps only weak demands) on the attribution's *object*. These demands might be met by that object's entering into relations with other things. In some cases the subject himself might be one of those things. Provided that entering into these relations does not place constraints on the intrinsic properties of that subject, this will be consistent with the attributed property being an objective one. The demands made on the subject by the truth of a subjective judgement must be such as to place constraints on the *intrinsic* properties of that subject. The demands made on the object by the truth of an objective judgement need not be intrinsically constraining. Their satisfaction might be rather undemanding.

With this basic contrast in mind we can say that, if objectivism about beauty were correct, then the truth of Jones's judgement in sentence (3) would place some demands on Smith; Smith being that judgement's object. If subjectivism about beauty were correct, then the truth of Jones's judgement would (also) place some demands on Jones; Jones being its subject. In the latter case, these demands would be such as to place constraints on Jones's intrinsic properties.

An anonymous reviewer for this journal points out that this treatment of the subjective/objective contrast makes the two categories non-exhaustive: a judgement the truth of which constrains neither the intrinsic properties of its subject nor any properties of its object will qualify as neither subjective nor objective. I do not think that this is problematic. The above treatment of the subjective/objective contrast does leave room for the possibility that there might be merely logical attributes (such as self-identity) that are neither objective nor subjective features of the things that have them. There is much that could be said about such attributes, but—since they play no role in the arguments that follow—we can, for present purposes, set them aside.

The reviewer also points out that our account of the subjective/objective contrast breaks down in cases where the subject and object of a judgement happen to be the same person. In those cases even a judgement that is entirely concerned with the properties of its object will place constraints on its subject, since that subject *is* the object. This problem requires some sort of solution, and the avoidance of it requires us to introduce a complication to the basic notion with which we have been operating. There are several forms that this complication might take. One possible way to address the problem might

be to classify properties as subjective and objective on the basis of the constraints that they place on *any possible* subject of their truthful attribution, rather than on the basis of the constraints that they place on the person who happens to be their actual subject. This approach will break down if there are objective properties that can only truly be self-attributed. It may therefore be more promising to consider a solution that employs a ‘qua’ locution, or an ‘in virtue of’ clause, saying something along the lines of:

The property *P* attributed to an object *o* in a judgement that is reported by a sentence with the form ‘*s* judges that *o* is *P*’ is subjective if and only if the truth of that judgement places constraints on the intrinsic properties of the item, *s*, qua subject of this judgement.

Some philosophers have qualms about ‘qua’ locutions and would prefer a version of this claim that was formulated with an ‘in virtue of’ clause. Others have qualms that go in the opposite direction. The basic idea could also be developed with other formulations. My own inclinations favour the formulation that is given above, but metaphysical controversies beyond the scope of the present paper will determine which of these approaches should be adopted. For our present purposes it is enough that some one of them be viable.

We need not take a stance on these broader controversies to see that the contrast between subjective and objective property-attributions is different from the contrast between context-sensitive and context-invariant vocabulary. These are contrasts of different sorts. The first concerns the loci of the truth makers for a property-attribution, and the loci of the things on which these truth makers place constraints. The second concerns variations in the semantic behaviour of the language with which such attributions are made.

The case in which Jones judges Smith to be *worrisome* therefore differs from the case in which Jones judges Smith to be young, or happy, or tall. In these paradigm cases of context-sensitivity, the truth of the content of Jones’ judgement places no intrinsic demands on Jones (who is the subject), only on Smith (who is the object). The matter of *which* property is referred to by an utterance of ‘tall’ will depend on the context in which that utterance occurs, but—having fixed that context and identified the property in question—the property that has been referred to will, in each case, be an objective one. Once we know *what* was said by the person who called Smith ‘tall’, the question of whether the thing that they said was *true* will be settled by considering the properties had *by Smith*. The vocabulary of subjectivism is the wrong vocabulary with which to register the contextual variation in the truth conditions of tallness attributions. In saying that ‘tallness’ is objective, we are saying, not that it refers to the same property in every context, but that, in whichever context we assess the judgement that a thing is tall, the demands made by the truth of that judgement’s content will always be demands on the object judged.

Subjectivism has the potential to threaten the obligation view of beauty, for the Wittgensteinian reason that we indicated above: there are some forms of subjectivism (although not all of them) that give beauty no life outside of our responses, and so entail that beauty can place no constraint on what those responses should be. Contextualism poses no such threat. If our attributions of beauty are context-sensitive, then the most that follows is that the demands beauty places upon us will vary from context to context. This is compatible with the idea that there really are such demands. We can therefore defend

the obligation view of beauty by rejecting subjectivism, without yet taking a stance on the question of contextualism. The following subsection makes the case for rejecting subjectivism (by using a diachronic version of the Moore-paradox that was employed against anti-realism). We shall then return to the question of how the unthreatening matter of beauty's context sensitivity might be handled.

An Argument for Objectivism

We have said that the truth of a subjective judgement must make some intrinsic demands on that judgement's subject, whereas the truth of an objective judgement cannot make any such demands. An argument for objectivism will therefore need to show that the truth of a judgement about beauty places *no* intrinsic demands on the subject who makes it: the objectivist must claim that, if I now rightly judge 'x is beautiful' to be true, then there is nothing I can do to myself that will make this very content become false (except in the special case where x happens to be me).

The subjectivist, on the other hand, requires that the truth of a beauty-judgement place some intrinsic demands on the subject of that judgement. Subjectivism therefore entails that such judgements can go from being true to being false on account of an intrinsic change in their subject, where this is a change in which the subject ceases to satisfy the intrinsic demands that the beauty-judgement places upon her.

The subjectivist and objectivist therefore give different verdicts concerning the possibility of coherently hoping that one's beauty judgements will change: unlike the judgement that something has an objective property, the judgement that something has a subjective property is compatible with the sincere hope that one will oneself change in such a way that the object ceases to have that property. Examples that illustrate this are not hard to find. For one such example, consider the traveller who is about to embark on what is intended to be a life-changing journey. This traveller can look around her home town, judge that everything in it is very familiar, and hope that she will cease to regard it as familiar. There is no tension between her judgement and her hope. Subjectivism about beauty suggests that it should be similarly unproblematic to judge that something is beautiful whilst hoping that one will oneself change in such a way that one ceases to find it so. The subjectivist therefore finds nothing to be rationally amiss in judgements with the form of sentence (5):

(5) This is beautiful, and I hope that I will cease to find it beautiful.

The subjectivist's verdict on such sentences contrasts with the verdict given by the objectivist. The objectivist finds the sincere endorsement of such a hope to be incoherent, on account of generating a diachronic version of the Moore paradox. If I were to get into a state wherein I judged a true objective content to be false, that could only be because I had confused myself, or had otherwise corrupted my own judgement. In changing my judgement about some particular objective content I would always, by my current lights, be making a mistake. The hope that one will make such a change of judgement therefore requires that one's current lights are already being called into question. For this reason, the objectivist takes the judgement that something is beautiful to be in rational tension with the hope than one will cease to find it so. Someone

who asserts sentence (5) must either be less than fully sincere about the first conjunct or less than fully sincere about the second. The maintenance of both attitudes requires a kind of ambivalence.

As with the anti-realist's verdict on synchronic Moore sentences (such as sentence (1) above) I claim that the subjectivist's verdict on diachronic Moore sentences (such as (5)) gets things wrong. The person who sincerely judges something to be beautiful, who thinks that she is right to make this judgement, and who hopes that she will cease to do so, is thereby putting herself into a rational bind, just as the objectivist predicts. The problem faced by such a person does not originate in considerations of conversational pragmatics. As with the synchronic Moore sentence that we discussed earlier, the position of someone who endorsed sentence (5) would be problematic even if this endorsement were made entirely in silent thought, so that there is no conversational context in which the sentence is asserted. The person who endorsed such a sentence would be someone for whom things were rationally going wrong. The exemplar of such a person would not be sane Hamlet but mad Lucifer, newly cast out of heaven:

Farewell happy fields
Where joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
Receive thy new possessor... (*Paradise Lost*, Book I, 249–252)

Hopes with the form of sentence (5) are not regarded by the objectivist as impossible. Irrationality is a psychological possibility. We might also suppose that Jones, having been jilted, sincerely hopes that he will cease to see the beauty of Smith. The objectivist can allow that such a hope is *psychologically* compatible with Jones finding Smith to be beautiful now. But if Jones is able to hold this as a sincere and reflective hope—and not merely as something that he says to himself in moments of emotional self-indulgence—then the objectivist will insist that the sincerity of that hope is evidence that Jones already mistrusts his current judgement of Smith's beauty. It might also be that Jones's despair at Smith's jilting is so sincere that he is here indulging in a masochistic wish for his own epistemic corruption. Whichever of these is the case, there will be some sort of rational tension between the judgement that Smith is beautiful and the hope that one cease to find him so. Such tension can be seen between the two parts of any attitude with the form of sentence (5). The existence of this tension speaks in favour of objectivism. It therefore gives us a reason to reject subjectivism, and thereby removes a consideration that might have seemed to weigh against the obligation view of beauty.

4. Contextualism

Subjectivism and Subject-Mentioning Contextualism

We have distinguished subjectivism from contextualism; seen that subjectivism threatens the obligation view, whereas contextualism does not; and said that subjectivism (like anti-realism) should be rejected. The possibility of endorsing contextualism therefore remains open to us. It should be embraced. Recent progress in semantics has greatly increased our

understanding of the forms that contextualism can take.¹¹ Some of its forms have a superficial similarity to subjectivism, and can therefore be used to explain why a subjectivist account of beauty has often seemed appealing.

In order to understand how contextualist semantics can play this role, we should remember that, *even when our specification of an utterance's context takes a subject-mentioning route*, contextualist semantics for that utterance will not entail that the utterance's content is subjective. This follows from the fact that the contrast between subjectivism and objectivism is quite different from that between contextualism and invariantism. The point can be illustrated with an example that depends on a simple variety of contextualism, begotten of indexically. To see such an example, consider Jones's judgement that the pepper is on the left of the salt. In order to identify the content of this judgement, we need to specify a frame of reference, which must be supplied in some way by the context in which the judgement occurs. This frame of reference will, in typical contexts, be an egocentric one, so that it is the location of *Jones* that centres the frame of reference when Jones is the subject. Even in these cases, where it is the subject who defines the context's frame of reference, there will be nothing subjective about the salt pot's position: Jones can be perfectly objective in judging where it is. The truth of this judgement places no intrinsic demands on its subject. We might need to mention that subject when specifying the contextually salient frame of reference, but we can do this without the subject himself (or anything that intrinsically constrains him) getting into the semantic content that is expressed in this context. The content of Jones' judgement can be objective, even when some mention of Jones plays a role in fixing our reference to that content.

This last point can also be illustrated with sentences in which the semantic role of context is more subtle. Suppose, counterfactually, that I have a nephew, and that he has asserted sentence (6):

- (6) There are actually an even number of hats in the world, but there could have been an odd number.

The content that my nephew would have asserted, had he uttered (6), would have been that there, in the world where he exists, the number of hats is even. In this case, my possible nephew is the subject. It is he who provides the argument that fixes the value of the 'actually' operator. But the judgements in which that operator figures are not therefore subjective. The cardinality of hats remains an objective matter, despite the fact that it is the subject who provides our means by which to specify which world's hats are to be counted.

Subjectivity should therefore be distinguished from context-sensitivity, even when the subject figures in the setting of the value for certain context sensitive parameters. Allowing the subject to occupy this reference-fixing role gives some sense to the idea that beauty can be 'in the eye of the beholder', for it entails that the subject *does* play a role in determining which things can truly be said, by that subject, to be beautiful. It also explains why it is that disputes about beauty can sometimes be fruitless. When Jones says that the pepper is on the left of the salt and Smith says that this same pepper is not on the left of the salt, they may or may not be disagreeing. If the contexts of their utterances

11 John MacFarlane, 'Nonindexical Contextualism', *Synthese* 166 (2009), 231–250; Carl Baker, 'Indexical Contextualism and the Challenges from Disagreement', *Philosophical Studies* 157 (2012), 107–123; Wayne A. Davis, 'On Nonindexical Contextualism', *Philosophical Studies* 163 (2013), 561–574.

provide different frames of reference then the contents that those utterances express need not be inconsistent. If Jones is intending to contradict Smith then he will either need to find some other vocabulary in which to do so, or else he will need to take steps to ensure that their frames of reference concur. Similarly, if Jones says that the Venus de Milo is beautiful and Smith says that the Venus de Milo is not beautiful, they may or may not be disagreeing. If Jones is intending to contradict Smith then he will either need to find some other vocabulary in which to state his position, or else he will need to take steps to ensure that there is a concurrence between their contextually-set parameters.

When we do enter into serious disputes about beauty—on the occasions when our beauty-talk is neither phatic nor emotive—we typically do engage in some preliminary negotiation of shared standards. If such standards cannot be found then the terms of our dispute will need to shift, or else we shall resort to a position of dialectic stalemate. There are occasions on which we do reach such a stalemate. It is on these occasions that clichés about the indisputability of taste are invoked. However familiar such occasions might be, it should also be clear that the abandonment of our aesthetic disputes is not inevitable. Terms *can* be found, and standards *can* be shared. This possibility of meaningful aesthetic dispute is significant because, if the subject of a beauty attribution got into its semantic content, there would be no such possibility. In that case, the truth conditions of Jones's statements would place constraints on Jones and the truth conditions of Smith's statements would place constraints on Smith. Neither could deny the other's claim by asserting something with the form of its negation. Unlike subjectivism, subject-mentioning contextualism allows for the possibility of aesthetic disagreement, while accounting for the fact that the articulation of such disagreements requires the mutual accommodation of contexts.

An Argument for Contextualism

A closer look at the diachronic Moore sentence that drove our previous argument gives some reason to think that predications of beauty are indeed context sensitive, in a way that can allow for there to be aesthetic disputes, while explaining the dependence of these disputes on a negotiation of shared standards. Such predications can change their semantic content depending on the context in which they are uttered. To see this, notice that our diachronic Moore sentence (sentence (5) above) lends itself to two readings, only one of which was employed in the foregoing argument. For the purposes of our argument against subjectivism, we interpreted sentence (5) strictly. Interpreted in this way, the sentence asserts a proposition, and then paradoxically expresses a wish that this very proposition not be believed. This can be glossed as:

(5a) This object is beautiful, and I hope I will cease to believe that.

On this reading, sentence (5) expresses a pair of attitudes to some one proposition (with objectivism being necessary to the explanation of the incompatibility of those attitudes). But if we allow ourselves to be careless of the distinction between *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua*—as in natural speech we often are—then an unparadoxical reading of sentence (5) also becomes available. On this reading, the sentence expresses a pair of attitudes that are directed at *different* propositions, each of which can be introduced with what is verbally the same predication. This can be glossed as:

(5b) This object is beautiful and I hope that I will cease to judge that ‘This object is beautiful’ is true.

On this less strict second reading, the two attitudes expressed are rationally compatible: perhaps the speaker is hoping that the meaning of the English language word ‘beautiful’ will change, or hoping that she will cease to be a speaker of English. *Any* instance of (5b) might then become coherent. And even if we fix the semantic facts about English, and about our speaker’s relation to it, (5b) can be read as the expression of a rationally unimpeachable wish. Some person who is hoping to move into a context where higher standards of beauty are maintained might assert (5b), just as the child who is hoping to grow taller might assert some sentence with the content of (7a):

(7a) This wall is high, and I hope that I will cease to judge that ‘This wall is high’.

Sentence (7a) is unparadoxical when uttered by the child who hopes that she will grow taller. In this respect, it differs from (7b), which displays all the rationally problematic ambivalence of our diachronic Moore sentence (5):

(7b) This wall is high, and I hope that I will cease to believe it.

In order to explain the contrast between (7a) and (7b), in respect of their capacity to generate a Moore-type paradox, we need to distinguish between the contents of their second conjuncts. We therefore need to distinguish between the proposition that the wall is high and the proposition that might be referred to by some future application of the predicate ‘high’ to the wall. Since the first of these is simply the proposition that we are referring to now by applying that very predicate to this very wall, there would be no such distinction to be drawn if this predicate made the same semantic contribution in every context of its use. Our contrasting intuitions about these sentences therefore provide grounds for taking ‘high’ to be context sensitive (which, of course, it is).

The contrasting paradoxicalness of (5a) and (5b) should be taken in the same way. To make sense of (5a) being paradoxical while (5b) is not (even when the semantic facts about English remain fixed), we need to make sense of the idea that one can hope that ‘This object is beautiful’ will cease to be true when one utters it, even while retaining the belief one currently expresses by saying ‘This object is beautiful’. We therefore need to distinguish between the proposition that some item is beautiful and the proposition that might be referred to by some future application of ‘beautiful’ to that item. Again, the first of these is simply the proposition that we are now referring to by applying that very predicate to the item in question, and so there would be no distinction to be drawn if this predicate made the same semantic contribution in every context of its use. Our contrasting intuitions about these sentences therefore provide grounds for taking ‘beautiful’ to be context sensitive. The unparadoxical intelligibility of sentence (5b) provides grounds for thinking that the semantic content of ‘beautiful’ changes, depending on the context in which it occurs.

What Sort of Contextualist Should We be?

Various semantic devices can allow for predicates to denote different properties, depending on the context of their utterance. The simplest of these allow the property referred to by a predicate to change, depending on the item to which that predicate is being applied. Taking

‘beautiful’ to be context sensitive in this way allows the property referred to by ‘beautiful’ in ‘_ is a beautiful sunset’, to be different from the property referred to by ‘beautiful’ in ‘_ is a beautiful dog’. There is precedent for such a view in the works of Frank Sibley,¹² but such a view only qualifies as a very minimal version of contextualism, since the only context from which it requires a semantic contribution is the verbal context of a completed sentence. The version of contextualism that is motivated by the considerations above is more thoroughgoing: endorsing the content of (5b) requires no paradoxical ambivalence only because a particular object that falls in the extension of ‘beautiful’ in the present context may fail to do so in some other context *where that same word is being applied to that same object*. The minimal contextualism of Sibley cannot explain the contrast between (5a) and (5b): it leaves no further room for contextual variation once the object of the prediction is fixed.

We arrive at a version of contextualism that can explain such a contrast by taking our argument’s analogy between height judgements and beauty judgements more seriously. The semantic content of tallness attributions varies from context to context because different standards of tallness are applied in these different contexts. There are various mechanisms by which those standards could come to be set. Some contexts set their standard by the salience of some particular contrast class. Others set their standard more directly, through the salience of some particular cut off point. In the playground, it might be that anyone taller than the average seven year old is *ipso facto* tall. In the context of moving the furniture, it might be that anything too big to fit through the door will be *ipso facto* tall. The case of tallness is relatively simple because there is just one dimension of variation—height—along which a standard needs to be fixed. In cases where there is more than one dimension, there will be the additional complication of contextual variation as to how these dimensions should be weighted relative to each other. When, for example, ‘bald’ shifts its extension from one context to the next, this may be because the relative importance of the number and the distribution of hairs has shifted. Similarly, a November day may fall with the extension of ‘wintry’ in one context because it is cold, whereas in another context it may need also to be dark. Different dimensions of similarity to a paradigm may count differently in different contexts. The number of potential dimensions may be large.

Different contexts of use can allow differences as to *which* things fall into the extension of a predicate, even when there is just one dimension of contextual variation. When there is more than one dimension, these different contexts can also allow for different but equally true *rankings*. In the case of beauty, we want to allow for differences of both sorts: if we compare the person who judges the Venus de Milo to be beautiful with the person who judges it not to be, then we are unlikely to find that the first of these is simply operating with a *higher* standard of beauty than the other. The disagreement will not only be over where to fix the cut off between the beautiful and the non-beautiful. It will also concern pair-wise judgements as to the relative beauty of various specimens. This can be accommodated by the idea that our standards of beauty shift from context to context, provided that those standards are understood to shift along more than one dimension.

12 This is most explicit in Frank N. Sibley, ‘Aesthetic Judgments: Pebbles, Faces, and Fields of Litter’, in his *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 176–189.

Multi-dimensional contextual variation is compatible with the obligation view of beauty, but raises a question about the way in which that view should be interpreted. If ‘beauty’ means different things in different contexts, what is its meaning when it occurs in a statement of the obligation view? That view tells us that we go wrong if we fail to value beauty, just as we would go wrong if we were indifferent to the truth of our beliefs. In the case of truth, we can make the existence of contextual parameters explicit by saying that, in any context *C*, we are obliged to value the truth in *C* of our beliefs in *C*. The obligation view of beauty says, similarly, that we are obliged in *C* to value the beauty in *C* of the things that we love in *C*.

5. Conclusion

A concern may remain in the minds of some readers that—anti-realism and subjectivity aside—the obligation view of beauty suffers from *prima facie* implausibility. The proponent of the indulgence view might regard the obligation view as vulnerable to an objection that is analogous to the queerness objection against moral realism: they might complain that a scientifically respectable view of the universe has no room for properties that have it in their nature to place us under an obligation.

There is a serious concern here, but the concern cannot be that science provides us with a picture in which beauty is not among the properties of the universe. The opposite is true. Nor should it be thought that a scientific attitude requires the obligation view to be regarded with suspicion. That view has its starting point in the thought that beauty is analogous to truth. Indifference to the truth of our beliefs would always involve us in a sort of mistake; the believing of falsehoods would always be a kind of failure. ‘Mistake’ and ‘failure’ are normative words. They are therefore vulnerable to a charge of queerness. But it would be philosophically defeatist to raise this as an objection to the idea that belief-formation brings with it an obligation to the truth. There is a question to be asked about how our scientific view of the universe should accommodate states that have truth conditions, and that are, therefore, subject to the truth norm. The philosophical problems of intentionality have their origins in the difficulty of answering that question. It would only be if one thought that our philosophical business ought already to be complete that one would take these problems as evidence that the question ought to be rejected, by denying that there is any such property as truth, or denying that true beliefs are indeed *correct*, in a way that false beliefs are not.

We introduced the obligation view of beauty by saying the mind is not a hoard of sentences, and so that truth is not the only criterion against which the mind’s engagement with the world is to be judged. It is a corollary of this that the problems of intentionality are only one part of the mind-body problem. The obligation view of beauty brings one of the mind’s other puzzling features before us. The resulting puzzle is not a basis for thinking that the obligation view should be rejected. It is merely an indication of the work, in aesthetics and in the philosophy of mind, which remains to be done.

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