Are there “aesthetic” judgments?

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In the field of aesthetics, scholars commonly express a commitment to the premise that there is a distinctive type of judgment that can be meaningfully labeled “aesthetic”, and that these judgments are distinctively different from other types of judgments (e.g., different from “moral” judgments). The most well-known historical defense of such a view is found in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In this work, Kant characterizes aesthetic judgment as, in part, involving a feeling of disinterested pleasure; that is, we supposedly do not take a practical interest in objects of aesthetic judgment (Kant, 2000, pp. 89-92; see also Ginsborg, 2019).

Although the details of Kant’s position have been heavily discussed over the years,[[1]](#footnote-2) it seems clear that a number of contemporary philosophers agree with Kant’s basic understanding of aesthetic judgment as denoting a distinctive kind of judgment that deserves its own distinctive philosophical analysis. That is, even if they reject the specifics of Kant’s characterization of aesthetic judgment, they have followed his lead in taking aesthetic judgment to constitute a distinctive judgment type.

In support of this interpretation, consider the following, contemporary scholarship that (directly or indirectly) aims to define or characterize aesthetic judgment: Keren Gorodeisky and Eric Marcus set out to explain what is distinctive about aesthetic judgment in their 2018 Arthur Danto prize winning paper; Dominic Lopes (2018) aims to provide a definition of aesthetic acts based in the recognition of aesthetic value; Noël Carroll (2012; 2015) offers an account of aesthetic experience based on the perception of aesthetic properties; Peter Kivy (1975) aims to tell us what makes aesthetic terms “aesthetic” and holds that such an account should tell us something about the nature of aesthetic judgment; Stephen Davies (2006) gives us an account of aesthetic judgment that incorporates consideration of the function(s) of the item being judged; and Thi Nguyen offers an account on which forming a judgment concerning a piece of art is akin to playing a game (2020). Kendall Walton (1970) does not tell us what an aesthetic judgment is, exactly, but he does tell us what a correct one should be in response to.

Some of these above-mentioned analyses are not exclusively and explicitly aiming to define ‘aesthetic judgment’, but focus instead on a broader set of terms such as ‘aesthetic activity’, ‘aesthetic appreciation’, or ‘aesthetic experience’. However, the bottom line is that all these analyses share a commitment to the idea that there is something special about “aesthetic” (e.g., aesthetic judgment, experience, etc.) such that it deserves special philosophical treatment.

A great many more philosophers than the ones mentioned thus far seem to share this general notion about the significance of aesthetic judgment as a distinct type: in the *Philpapers* archive ‘aesthetic judgment’ has its own identified sub-category, or leaf, with 822 papers listed under said leaf; ‘aesthetic experience’ also has its own leaf, with 925 manuscripts listed under said leaf. This means that there are almost 2000 papers focused, at least in part, on aesthetic judgment or aesthetic experience.[[2]](#footnote-3) So, there has been no shortage of attempts to explore the nature of aesthetic judgment, indicating that philosophers see something quite special about it. There is only one other judgment type that they have lavished as much attention on, and that is ‘moral judgment’.

In the field of philosophy – and more specially, in the art of taxonomy and nomenclature building – a good definition of a term is taken to be one that succeeds in accurately identifying which feature(s) are shared by all and only the members of the class that the term is meant to designate. One broadly accepted standard expression of this approach is a so-called *Aristotelian Definition* (e.g., Berg, 1982; Seppälä et al., 2017), which holds that a good definition should also build on a specification of its parent term. On such an approach, a definition of ‘aesthetic judgment’ should be based on specifying what makes ‘aesthetic judgment’ different from mere ‘judgment’. We can represent this approach with the following logical form: *A is a B that Cs*. According to an *Aristotelian* standard, then, a successful definition of aesthetic judgment should take the following form: *An ‘aesthetic judgment’ is a ‘judgment’ that ‘Cs’*,where the ‘C’ signifies the very features and characteristics that make ‘aesthetic judgment’ different from mere ‘judgment’.

In their analysis and critique of the concept ‘moral judgment’, we find Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Thalia Wheatley (2014) asking for something similar: If moral judgment really is a distinctive type of judgment, then there must be some significant, unifying feature(s) that such judgments have in common.[[3]](#footnote-4) Similarly, if aesthetic judgments do constitute a distinctive type, we should at least be able to identify *some* significant feature(s) that meaningfully distinguishes said judgments from other judgment types (if there are any) or judgment simplicitor.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that, within an Aristotelian framework, there is no clear avenue for meaningfully differentiating ‘aesthetic’ judgment from other types of judgment, and, as such, we aim to question the prevailing view that aesthetic judgment does in fact constitute a distinctive kind of judgment that is in need of, or can be subject to, distinctive theorizing. In other words, we plan to argue that there is currently no defensible definition of the ‘C’ on offer. We advance our argument primarily through demonstrating that leading contemporary accounts of aesthetic judgment do not successfully distinguish a *subtype* of judgment in that they do not tell us how making an aesthetic judgment differs substantially from judging that 2+3=5, that football is entertaining, or that today is Tuesday.

In support of our position, we consider the following broad approaches to defining aesthetic judgment: (1) aesthetic judgment can be defined via its content; (2) aesthetic judgment is phenomenologically distinguishable in some way from other judgment types; and (3) aesthetic judgment is distinguished by specific brain processes. After considering these approaches, we argue that each approach fails to provide the required distinguishing condition (i.e., the ‘C’).

The present analysis does not aim to give an exhaustive review of the entire literature, nor claim that it has provided an exhaustive list of possible definitions of aesthetic judgment. More modestly, the manuscript aspires to show that mainstream definitions of aesthetic judgment do not succeed within an *Aristotelian* format (i.e., a format acknowledged by philosophers). It must be further stressed that we do not take ourselves to show that the phrase ‘aesthetic judgment’ is meaningless or semantically empty, but instead to show that it fails to pick out a distinctive act or state deserving of its own theoretical account. It is possible to adopt a fiat definition of aesthetic judgment, which arbitrarily precludes by convention anything that its users of this terminology choose; however, we suspect that this concession – that the term ‘aesthetic judgment’ is a fiat term – is unappealing to many philosophers working in the field of aesthetics.

1. **Content Theories of aesthetic judgment**

An intuitive approach to defining aesthetic judgment might be the following: aesthetic judgments are judgments that concern aesthetic entities; that is, we make aesthetic judgments when we perceive objects or events that have aesthetic properties. On this view, the judgment *type* is defined by what it is a judgment *of*. We find a similar approach to defining moral judgment in the meta-ethics literature,[[4]](#footnote-5) which is some evidence of the prima facie appeal of this definitional type. We will refer to views that take this definitional form as *Content Theories*. The following authors seem to offer something like a Content Theory of aesthetic judgment:

Frank Sibley maintains that aesthetic judgments are defined in part by the fact that they are the recognition of aesthetic properties. Although Sibley adds that aesthetic judgments are also characterized by involving the exercise of taste (1959, 421) or “aesthetic sensitivity” (2001, 34),[[5]](#footnote-6) the defining feature for Sibley is that an aesthetic judgment is the recognition of aesthetic properties: when we recognize that some entity is “graceful, dainty or garish” (2001, 34), we make aesthetic judgments. However, Sibley sees no real need to define “aesthetic property” itself, stating:

I make this broad distinction by means of *examples* of judgments, qualities, and expressions. There is, it seems to me, no need to defend the distinction…. To deny such a distinction is to be precluded from discussing most questions of aesthetics at all, just as one could hardly begin ethics without the prior recognition that some judgements and notions do, while others do not, concern morality. One must be able to recognize examples of one’s subject-matter (2001, 34).[[6]](#footnote-7)

Like Sibley, Noël Carroll (2012, 2015) also advances a Content Theory, but unlike Sibley, Carroll explicitly categorizes his own theory under such a heading, stating that he seeks to advance a “content approach” (2015, p. 171) to characterizing the experience of artworks. Carroll presents himself as offering an account of aesthetic *experience* (his 2015 is entitled “Defending the content approach to aesthetic experience”), yet the experience he is aiming to characterize results or follows from a cognitive act quite similar to what is usually understood by the term ‘judgment’. On Carroll’s view, when individuals attend to the aesthetic properties of artifacts with an understanding of the purpose aimed at by the artist, they have aesthetic experiences:

So, it seems that at the very least, we can say that an aesthetic experience of a

work of art is a matter of attending with understanding to the formal and/or the

aesthetic and/or the expressive properties of a work of art. In other words, if

*an experience of a work of art is focused with understanding upon at least one*

*of these dimensions of the work in question*, then that is sufficient to call the experience in question an aesthetic experience. (2012, 173, our italics)

Carroll further states that aesthetic experience is, in part, an assessment of “the means by which the purposes of the work are realized. In this regard, aesthetic experiences involve focus upon the how of the work.” (2012, p. 174).

Focusing on certain properties with the aim intended by the artist in mind sounds quite a bit like forming a judgment. On his theory we must, at the very least, make a judgment as to what purpose we think the artist was trying to realize, and then aim to focus on those properties that we see as relevant to the artist’s fulfilling of that purpose. Therefore, one could reasonably characterize Carroll’s work as offering a theory of aesthetic judgment.

Dominic McIver Lopes advances a Content Theory as well. Like Sibley, Lopes takes it for granted that the reader has a clear grasp of what an aesthetic property is due to general agreement on certain paradigm cases (2018, p. 46-47). As a result, Lopes believes he can “punt” on offering an account of what makes a property an aesthetic one (p. 46); that is, he believes he can take for granted that his audience knows what makes something aesthetically valuable. Lopes’ main goal is to expand our traditional understanding of what constitutes an aesthetic activity, and to that end he defines an “aesthetic act” as any act that is responsive to an aesthetic evaluation:

A’s ϕing is an aesthetic act = A’s ϕing counterfactually depends on the *content* of A’s aesthetic evaluation of x, where A’s ϕing operates on x (2018, p. 34, our italics).

On this view, if a person decides to hang a painting in their house because they judged it to have aesthetic value – such as making the judgment that the painting is beautiful – then such a person is *acting* aesthetically. One could say that the person is behaving in response to their aesthetic judgment. Lopes aims to identify a distinctive sort of activity, aesthetic activity, and he defines acting aesthetically in terms of the recognition of aesthetic value (2018, pg. 34). Notice that in the definition above, aesthetic acts are defined in terms of the *content* being evaluated. This is what makes his view a Content Theory:aesthetic activity is defined in relation to the recognition of aesthetic values or properties.

Because Lopes is depending on his audience already understanding what an aesthetic value is, he knowingly gives a circular definition of aesthetic value:

Necessarily, V is an aesthetic value only if the fact that x is V lends weight to the proposition that A aesthetically should ϕ in C (2018, p. 42).[[7]](#footnote-8)

This is where we see Lopes “punting” on the question of aesthetic value. He believes, ultimately, that no definition needs to be given of what makes a value distinctively aesthetic (2018, pp. 41-43). His aim is to instead explain the role beauty has in our everyday lives and the place we make for aesthetic activity in those lives (2018, p. 3).

The idea that aesthetic judgments can be defined in relation to the content judged is plausible if we assume that there is such a thing as aesthetic properties and that these properties can be given an independent characterization. If it turns out that aesthetic properties themselves are not well-defined, then we really do have a problem of circularity: aesthetic judgments are judgments of aesthetic properties, and aesthetic properties are whatever properties we pay attention to when we make aesthetic judgments. Such an account is perfectly uninformative. Furthermore, even if it turns out that aesthetic properties can be coherently defined, a defender of aesthetic judgment as a distinctive kind would still need to show that a distinctive type of judgment is being exercised when such properties are considered. That is, we would still want to know how judging aesthetic properties differed from, say, judging geometrical properties or moral properties. We don’t typically take each type of property to correspond with a distinctive form of judgment (if so, the number judgment types would be enormous). So, we would still need a reasoned argument from the Content Theorist as to why aesthetic properties, if they are distinctive, necessarily correspond to a special form of judgment.

As we have seen, Sibley takes it for granted that we have some clear sense of what constitutes an aesthetic property, and he offers what many have viewed as a ‘canonical’ list of such properties: “graceful, delicate, dainty, handsome, comely, elegant, garish” (1959, p. 422). Sibley is not the only one who takes this notion of a common understanding of aesthetic properties for granted. Lopes readily admits that there is much disagreement in the literature about what *makes* a property aesthetic, but he believes that most philosophers working in the field “concur on paradigm cases of aesthetic value” (2018, p. 46; see also, Nguyen, 2021), and Lopes goes on to cite Sibley’s list as evidence in favor of this supposed agreement. Here Lopes states that “The paradigm aesthetic values are those that either appear on Sibley’s… list[ ] or that nobody would object to including on their lists” (2018, p. 46). In further support of this supposed agreement, Lopes claims that “we know beauty when we see it” and that “none doubt that being graceful is an aesthetic value” (2018, p. 47) (Note that here we see Lopes using “aesthetic value” interchangeably with “aesthetic property”, identifying “gracefulness” as an “aesthetic value”, which Sibley labels an “aesthetic property”).

Carroll takes the same tact, stating that he is using the term “aesthetic properties” to denote “the kinds of non-expressive qualities to which Frank Sibley often alludes” (2015, p. 171). On his view, when someone is experiencing said properties, they are having aesthetic experiences and making aesthetic judgments. Or to put it differently: when a person is experiencing aesthetic content, they are also potentially making aesthetic judgments (hence, Content Theory).

It may be true that everyone who sees the arches in Arches National Park thinks that they are graceful. The problem is that the authors have yet to inform us how attributing the *aesthetic* property or value of “being beautiful” or “being graceful” differs in kind from the attribution of, say, “being affordable”, “being tasty” or “being sexually attractive”. It seems to us that a successful theory of aesthetic judgment must tell us what the difference is between the *non-aesthetic* judgments that “x is sexually attractive” or “x is affordable” and the *aesthetic* judgments that “x is graceful” or “x is garish”. Without some way of drawing such a distinction, it is unclear what exactly Content Theory is supposed to be a *theory of*, especially since this class of theories does not appeal to any characteristic feeling or phenomenal experience that is supposed to accompany, and thereby mark out, such judgments. Sibley, for example, makes no mention of a characteristic experience that accompanies the perception of aesthetic properties beyond his statement that the recognition of such properties involves an exercise of taste (which Sibley leaves undefined). Lopes positively rejects traditional accounts of aesthetic judgment that tie such judgments to feelings of pleasure (2018, p. 155). Similarly, Carroll does not identify aesthetic judgment with any experience or feeling (2015, p. 172).

Without a clear definition of aesthetic property, we cannot be confident that we make “aesthetic” judgments at all on Content Theory. James Shelley raises a similar concern when discussing the work of Lopes: “if aesthetic acts counterfactually depend on mental representations of items having aesthetic values, we won’t know which acts are aesthetic unless we know which values are” (2021, p. 214).

The philosophers under scrutiny here have proposed similar responses to this line of criticism: There is a whole set of adjectives that we all supposedly agree demarcate aesthetic properties. Lopes, like Sibley, maintains that no one could *reasonably* doubt that, for instance, “graceful” denotes an aesthetic property. Even if it is true that many aesthetic terms can be used in non-aesthetic ways, what matters is that terms such as “graceful” and others on Sibley’s list are used to pick out widely recognized “aesthetic value facts…. *Die Hard* is a hoot. Creed’s Vetiver is buoyant. A photograph by Atget is quirky. [Lopes’ 2018] is not for those for whom examples like these pose a total mystery” (Lopes, 2021, p. 234).

Although it is perfectly reasonable to think that English speakers generally have a shared (yet undefined) sense of what it means for an object or action to be graceful, nonetheless we believe the above objection retains its force: we still haven’t been told anythingabout what makes “gracefulness” a description of a specifically aesthetic property or what makes recognizing “gracefulness” the product of a distinctly ‘aesthetic’ judgment type. It may be that few people doubt that “being graceful” is ordinarily seen as a valuable attribute of an object; however, it is perfectly reasonable to doubt whether being graceful is a distinctive kind of value property or whether the judgment/recognition of such properties constitutes a distinctive kind of judgment.

Consider the following analogy that we think clarifies the problem we see with Content Theory: It seems like almost everyone could judge that a certain person having severe delusions and hallucinations, let us call him Bob, is behaving in such a way that people would describe him as “insane” (to use Lopes’ phrasing: everyone would concur that Bob is a paradigm case of insanity). Yet people could still invoke such terminology without agreeing on the facts/properties of what constitutes “insane” behavior. For example, some people may say “insanity” entails both delusions and hallucinations; others may claim that hallucinations are a sufficient condition; some point to specific erratic behaviors by Bob, and so forth. Practically everyone in town might point to Bob as a paradigm case of an “insane” person, while simultaneously disagreeing on what exactly it is about Bob that makes him deserving of the label “insane”. If you asked people “What makes Bob insane?”, they would all give different answers. In short, everyone could be judging that Bob is “insane” without having any shared agreement of why they call Bob “insane”.

Now let us return to the case at hand. It could be that almost everyone agrees that the *Mona Lisa* or the Grand Canyon is “beautiful” or “magnificent” or readily attribute some undeniably “aesthetic” terms to such objects. However, that in itself doesn’t tell us that there are “aesthetic properties” (or as Lopes calls them: “aesthetic value facts”) available that constitute the object of distinctive aesthetic judgments. Just as the common recognition of Bob’s “insanity” doesn’t conclusively tell us that there are properties that everyone agrees make Bob “insane”. The existence of a distinct kind of value fact or property is simply assumed in the arguments put forth by the advocates of Content Theory. It isn’t clear why we should think that the facts that make the Grand Canyon beautiful are distinguishable in some meaningful way from the facts that make the Grand Canyon deep, or wide, or worth visiting. It is not clear what basis we have for making such discriminations.[[8]](#footnote-9) If it hasn’t been made explicitly clear why such properties are different in kind, then it is also not clear how judgments of such properties could be different in kind. If we have no meaningful way to distinguish between aesthetic properties and non-aesthetic properties, then the supposed common recognition of aesthetic properties cannot be used as the basis for a meaningful definition of aesthetic judgment.

1. **Phenomenological Theories of aesthetic judgment**

On this position, what we will refer to as the *Phenomenological Theory*, the idea is that aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment is constituted in some way by a certain characteristic, inter-subjectively agreed upon type of experience. As mentioned in the introduction, a view on which aesthetic judgments and appreciative experiences are accompanied by a characteristic feeling can be traced back at least to Kant, who held that aesthetic judgments were distinguished by a feeling of “disinterested pleasure” and, in certain circumstances, feelings of “the sublime” (1914).

A great many authors have agreed with Kant that aesthetic judgment has something to do with pleasure, whether disinterested or not. For example, Stephen Davies holds that the distinctive function of art is to “provide an aesthetically (or artistically) pleasurable experience when contemplated for its own sake” (2006, 228). Although Lopes (2018) aims to give an account of aesthetic appreciation that does not depend on pleasure, in his survey of theories of aesthetic value he concludes that, historically, philosophers have almost uniformly identified aesthetic value with pleasure. For Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018), to judge something as aesthetically good is to judge it worthy of being liked. Kendall Walton (1993), Matthew Kieran (2010, 2011), Bence Nanay (2017), and David Sackris (2018) all maintain that aesthetic judgment has something to do with the experience of pleasure.

However, given the great variety of judgments and experiences that are correlated with pleasure, pleasure alone cannot distinguish aesthetic judgments from non-aesthetic judgments. If we take this approach of focusing on the phenomenological or subjective side of experience, we will need to refer to more than pleasure to mark out aesthetic judgment as a distinctive judgment type. Although those who offer phenomenological accounts may not present themselves as offering theories of aesthetic judgment (as discussed earlier), there are good reasons to think that if aesthetic experiences are distinctive from a phenomenological perspective, then surely aesthetic judgments would also take on that distinctive feeling, or at least typically be correlated with it.

Several philosophers have aimed to identify aesthetic experience not merely with pleasure but with a distinctive mental state. Edward Bullough, for example, held that aesthetic experience is the result of, or perhaps constituted by, a distinctive mental attention or scrutiny that he called “psychical distance” (1912), and we might identify him as the key twentieth century proponent of such a view. Yet this tradition of identifying aesthetic experience with a peculiar kind of attention goes back quite a way, and perhaps all the British sentimentalists held such a view, depending on who’s historical telling you prefer (see Stolniz, 1978; cf. Dickie, 1974).

The most well-known twentieth century characterization of aesthetic experience comes from Monroe Beardsley, who held that aesthetic value lied in the perception of unity, complexity, and intensity (1958). Jerome Stolnitz identified a distinctive mental state, which he calls “disinterested attention” (1960), as a key characteristic of aesthetic experience. Jeorg Fingerhut and Jesse Prinz (2018)[[9]](#footnote-10) argue that aesthetic experience is characterized by a feeling of wonder. That is, valuing an artwork (i.e., judging it to be successful) produces a feeling of wonder. Alan Goldman does not identify aesthetic experience with any particular feeling as Fingerhut and Prinz do, yet he maintains that “aesthetic experiences of artwork are distinct” and that “The effect is to seem to us an alternative world in which we are occupied for brief periods of escape from our ordinary affairs…The measure of a value of an artwork is its capacity to so fully engage us….” (2013, 332).

Despite the fact that a great number of contemporary philosophers have recognized the difficulty in characterizing the nature of aesthetic experience (e.g., Beardsley, 1981) and that many in the field have viewed Dickie (1965) as offering decisive arguments against experience-focused accounts, theorists have nonetheless maintained that aesthetic objects offer a distinctive kind of valuable experience, or manifest a certain kind of value, that when perceived results in a distinctive sort of feeling; alternatively, they have held that when engaging in a certain kind of perception or attention on an object, the result is a distinctive kind of feeling or experience.

Let us now consider the merits of the view just presented that either we can induce ourselves to perceive objects in a certain way (e.g., psychical distance), which generates a certain distinctive experience, or a view on which the aesthetic objects themselves cause this distinctive feeling when we evaluate or perceive them. Many arguments have been produced against both variants of what we are classifying as a single type of view.[[10]](#footnote-11) However, what we see as a significant (and seemingly underappreciated) argument against the Phenomenological Theory is the general disagreement as to what sorts of objects admit of aesthetic appreciation and corresponding aesthetic judgment. If aesthetic experience and subsequent judgment is in fact accompanied by a distinctive feeling, we would expect there to be little disagreement about what sorts of objects admit of aesthetic appreciation: the list would be comprised of whichever items were widely perceived to be correlated with this signature feeling. Similarly, if aesthetic judgment had something to do with a certain kind of perception or attention, we might find wide agreement that any object can be the subject of this sort of attention. Is this what we find in the field?

The answer to this question is a moderate if not decisive “No”. The history of aesthetic theorizing is rife with disputes over just this matter. For example, Kant famously denied that wine couldoffer aesthetic experience and several philosophers have agreed with him. For example, Bullough (1912) and George Santayana (1896) both maintained that objects of the senses of smell and taste cannot offer aesthetic experiences or be objects of aesthetic judgment. A bit later, Carolyn Korsmeyer (1975) argues against their conclusion that objects of taste and smell cannot offer aesthetic experiences. A bit more recently, Douglas Burnham and Ole Skilleås (2012) argue that the complexity of wine and the history of wine appreciation suggests that wine has aesthetic properties appreciable via the nose and mouth and therefore is a worthy subject of aesthetic judgment; yet they also maintain that most other items sensed via the nose and mouth are both not complex enough and do not have an adequate history of appreciation to enable the experience of said items to rise to the level of aestheticappreciation. However, Nick Perulla (2016) argues that both food and drink can, in the right circumstances, offer aesthetic experiences and admit of aesthetic judgment (We end the examples here, but the reader should be aware that the debate regarding the aesthetic status of food and drink is extensive; for central anthologies, see Allhoff & Monroe, 2007; Smith, 2007).

Not only is there disagreement over whether food and drink are possible objects of aesthetic judgment and thereby offer a distinctive experience, there is disagreement as to whether aesthetic experiences can be found in nature, or if they are confined to man-made things. Kant (1914) took nature to be a paradigm example of aesthetic experience. Carroll (2015) has recently proposed that a theory of aesthetic experience need not account for the experience of nature. Don Mannison (1980) explicitly denies that nature offers aesthetic experience, a view that reflects a position commonly held by mid-twentieth century aesthetic theorists, which in turn was a radical abandoning of a two-hundred-year-old orthodoxy. Ronald Hepburn (1966) found himself having to rail against his mid-century contemporaries:

Open an eighteenth-century work on aesthetics, and the odds are it will contain a substantial treatment of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque in nature … In our own day, however, writings on aesthetics attend almost exclusively to the arts and very rarely indeed to natural beauty, or only in the most perfunctory manner. Aesthetics is even defined by some mid-century writers as ‘the philosophy of art’, ‘the philosophy of criticism’, analysis of the language and concepts used in describing and appraising art-objects (p. 285).

From this evidence we can conclude that, 230 years since Kant’s *Third Critique*, philosophers are still uncertain as to whether perceiving a pristine mountain lake or tasting a fine wine constitute aesthetic experiences and/or whether they can be objects of aesthetic judgment.

As a final example of disagreement concerning which entities admit of being judged aesthetically or causing aesthetic experiences, consider this: philosophers disagree as to whether viewing a *color* by itself counts as an aesthetic experience.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Admittedly, the field of philosophy is rife with deep-seated disagreement. However, debate over which entities even admit of aesthetic judgment, we think, is quite telling, as the disagreement centers over what is even supposedly under investigation. The disagreement here is akin to a disagreement among ethicists over something as fundamental as whether destructive weather systems admit of moral judgment. Such a fundamental disagreement should give us good reason to doubt that aesthetic judgment or aesthetic experience involves a distinctive feeling of any kind: such fundamental disagreement about the objects which admit of aesthetic judgment should lead us to doubt that any sort of distinctive phenomenological experience accompanies such judgment for any substantial portion of the population. If such acts do involve a distinctive feeling, that feeling must be so idiosyncratic it is hardly worth attempting to create a general theory about.

Furthermore, the theories that focus on a distinct phenomenological experience as the distinguishing mark of aesthetic judgment are, in some sense, directly at odds with the Content Theories discussed above. On some Content Theories, like Carroll’s or Lopes’, practically every artifact on earth has aesthetic properties and so can be an object of aesthetic judgment. But surely not every artifact on earth can cause this distinctive experience, otherwise it would be unclear what is so distinctive about the feeling. For these reasons, it does not seem that aesthetic judgment can be defined in terms of a distinctive feeling or experience that accompanies (or is preceded by, or is a consequent of) said judgment.

One objection to the argument offered here is that specific emotions or feelings can, in fact, be aroused by anything; emotions are not correlated with specific objects. So that there is disagreement about which objects admit of aesthetic judgment/cause aesthetic experiences cannot count as a conclusive argument against phenomenological accounts. Part of the appeal of such a position might be found in the fact that phenomenological theories are *not* limited to a certain set of objects.[[12]](#footnote-13) The experience of fear is not correlated with any specific objects, so why should aesthetic experience or judgment be necessarily correlated with some set of objects or properties?

In some sense, an objection such as this helps our argument: If aesthetic judgment is correlated with a distinctive feeling, then why is there continued disagreement over which objects may be objects of aesthetic judgment? The way in which we discuss aesthetic judgment is quite different from other emotion/feeling based issues. For example, when a person says, “I find clowns to be scary”, we might think that such a response is a bit silly, but we typically don’t doubt that they do have a fear response to clowns. However, when a philosopher claims that they have aesthetic experiences with, say, Thanksgiving Dinner, this is exactly what other philosophers seek to deny. As discussed above, Bullough, Santana, and Kant all denied that taste experiences could offer aesthetic experiences or be objects of aesthetic judgments; however, others have argued for the opposite conclusion. The very difficulty here is that philosophers both want to correlate aesthetic judgment with a distinctive feeling *and* with a certain set of objects or properties. This, however, may actually be part of the problem: it seems they are presenting themselves with two divergent, perhaps even inconsistent, tasks. If we maintain that only *some* objects or properties (as has been traditionally maintained) are able to cause the distinctive aesthetic experience, then we have possibly reduced Phenomenological Theories to Content Theories. And we have already given arguments against Content Theories.

1. **Cognitive Theories of Aesthetic Judgment**

Finally, we will consider views on which aesthetic judgment is identified with a brain area, brain process, or network of brain processes/areas. We will call such views *Cognitive Theories*. That is, we might think that a certain brain area or set of areas corresponds with the cognitive process that leads to an aesthetic judgment. So, in other words, if aesthetic judgments always involve a certain kind of cognitive process, this may be discernable at the level of brain activity. Thi Nguyen, for example, says “the practice of aesthetic appreciation seems deeply cognitive” (2020, p. 1127), and such claims admit of empirical investigation. Unless one subscribes to dualism, if aesthetic judgment constitutes a distinctive cognitive activity, we might reasonably expect it to correspond to identifiable brain activity (be it a specific brain region, neural network, or reliably coordinated set of brain areas).

In his overview article on aesthetics and cognitive science, Dustin Stokes states the following:

What cognitive science says about cognition is important for philosophical aesthetics. The explanatory implications might also run the other way. One might infer from the fact that there is an independent field of research, aesthetics, and philosophy of art, that there is something special about these kinds of experiences—including cognitive ones—we have with artworks and aesthetic objects (2009, p. 715).

We also find Brown and colleagues taking a similar position, and they explicitly attribute their research program to the work of philosophers of aesthetics:

The notion of the ‘aesthetic’ is a concept from the philosophy of art of the 18th century according to which the perception of beauty in sublime artworks occurs by means of a special process distinct from the appraisal of ordinary objects, for example food items [Goldman, 2001; Guyer, 2005]. Hence, our appreciation of a painting is *presumed* to be cognitively distinct from our appreciation of an apple (2011, 250, our italics). [[13]](#footnote-14)

In this sense, Cognitive Theories propose that even if aesthetic judgments cannot be defined based on what they are about (i.e., Content Theory) or the experience generated (i.e., Phenomenological Theory), they can still be defined at the level of brain processes that give rise to such judgments: sunsets and abstract art may have radically different properties and invoke very different emotions, but if the judgments of such objects are the result of processes in specific neural networks or brain areas, then such a discovery would provide some reason for thinking that aesthetic judgment really is a distinctive type.

Although a few philosophers have explicitly maintained that there is no role for experimental psychology/neuro-aesthetics when it comes to explaining aesthetic judgment, others have been more sympathetic,[[14]](#footnote-15) and over the last 15 years or so philosophers have generally taken a much greater interest in cognitive science, experimental research, and what it has to say about aesthetic activity.[[15]](#footnote-16) If aesthetic judgment does in fact involve a special kind of valuing that is “deeply cognitive”, we would expect to see such a distinctive cognitive activity reflected in scans of brain activity when subjects consider what are widely agreed to be aesthetic objects.

Unfortunately, the early results of the field of neuro-aesthetics are not promising for the view that aesthetic judgment constitutes a distinctive cognitive activity. In experiments that make use of neuro-imaging technology, researchers have broadly failed to find brain areas, processes, or set of brain processes that are consistently correlated with aesthetic judgment. In a study conducted by Oshin Vartanian and Vinod Goel (2004), individuals were shown a variety of representational and abstract paintings while inside a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine. When subjects expressed preferences for certain paintings, Vartanian and Goel observed activation in a number of areas of the brain, including the left cingulate sulcus, an area of the brain responsible for processing “emotionally salient content” (2004, p. 896). Critically, however, the cingulate sulcus is generally involved in evaluating stimuli that the subject finds rewarding and that activate positive emotions. This area of the brain is not only responsive to art images (2003, 897).

Hideaki Kawabata and Semir Zeki (2003) also had individuals consider a variety of image types while in an fMRI machine (i.e., portrait, landscape, still life, and abstract compositions). For our purposes, their most significant finding was that viewing different types of images produced activity in different areas of the brain. That is, when viewing portraits and landscapes, distinctive areas of the brain were engaged as compared to the viewing of still-life and abstract compositions (2004, 1700). In some respect, this shouldn’t be surprising: there are specific areas of the brain devoted to facial recognition, and these areas were activated by the viewing of portraits. If different image types activate different areas of the brain, then this seems like significant evidence against the position that there is a single area of the brain or brain process devoted to appraising aesthetic objects.

Furthermore, before viewing the images inside the fMRI machine, Kawabata and Zeki had individuals categorize images as beautiful, neutral, or ugly. Individuals were then shown the images they had previously classified as beautiful, neutral, or ugly within the fMRI machine. Kawabata and Zeki found no specific areas of the brain that routinely activated when individuals viewed images that they had previously judged as beautiful or ugly, suggesting that there was no single “judgment process” or area of the brain engaged when reaching such conclusions (2004, p. 1702).

There is little support here for the idea that there is an ‘aesthetic judgment’ center of the brain or a distinct neural network. The viewing of portraiture calls on distinctive parts of the brain devoted to a distinctive task, which is the identification of faces. If an image is judged as beautiful, this may activate the visual reward system, but this is a general perception system and not a system devoted to a specific task such as aesthetic evaluation.[[16]](#footnote-17) In their meta-analysis of 93 neuro-imaging studies of aesthetic judgments, Steven Brown and colleagues reach a similar conclusion as Kawabata and Zeki, stating: “Human neuro-imaging studies have convincingly shown that the brain areas that mediate aesthetic responses to artworks overlap those that mediate the appraisal of objects of evolutionary importance, such as the desirability of food items or the attractiveness of potential mates” (2011, p. 250).

In his review of recent work in neuro-aesthetics, Marcos Nadal (2013) also concluded that viewing artwork activates general reward centers of the brain and relies on general emotion processing systems. He states that:

There is no localized seat for art in the brain. Rather, our experience of art emerges from the interaction among the nodes of a broadly distributed network of cortical and subcortical areas of the brain. None of these are specialized in responding to art alone, not even in the sense that one could think of Broca and Wernicke’s regions as specialized for language processing. They all play crucial roles in other domains of human experience, from perceiving small details in the world or making small decisions to abstract reasoning or establishing social relationships (2103, pg. 152).

The conclusion of the review articles by Nadal (2013) and Brown and colleagues (2011) mirror those being reached in the neuroscientific investigation of moral judgment: cognitive scientists and moral psychologists have recently concluded that there does not seem to be a ‘moral judgment’ area of the brain, or specific process or set of neural processes, devoted to forming moral judgments (e.g., Borg et al., 2011; Bzodak, et al., 2012; Cushman and Young, 2011; Decety and Cowell, 2014; Greene 2015a, 2015b; Young and Dungan, 2012). Based on this neuroscientific evidence, as well as philosophical argumentation, some philosophers have similarly begun to conclude that ‘moral judgment’ is not a unified concept and that some of the philosophical positions on moral judgment that depend on the assumption that moral judgments are unified in some fashion need to be re-examined (e.g., McHugh et al., 2021; Railton, 2017; Sinnott-Armstrong and Thalia, 2012, 2014; Stich, 2006; Sackris 2021; Sackris and Larsen, 2022; Cf. Kumar 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

Admittedly, different cognitive processes could nonetheless yield products with important, shared features, but as we have seen from the earlier sections of this paper, philosophers have yet to identify a significant, shared feature that unites the judgments we typically refer to as “aesthetic”. The fact that such diverse cognitive processes give rise to said judgments, and the fact the studies reviewed here only consider the medium of visual appreciation, we can only imagine the diverse set of brain processes that might be called upon when music is listed to, or fine wine is tasted. Although the field of neuro-aesthetics is a young one, the findings are already decidedly pointing in one direction: there is no area of the brain, or distinctive set of neural processes, devoted to making ‘aesthetic judgments’. It appears that what researchers ordinarily refer to as ‘aesthetic judgment’ calls on diverse areas of the brain to process stimuli and then makes use of general reward circuits within the brain to form positive or negative judgments.

1. **Conclusion**

The phrase “aesthetic judgment” may have a somewhat well-understood, conventional meaning in philosophical circles, and people outside these circles appear to routinely use it to indicate that they have made a judgment about art, scenic vistas, and perhaps some foods. Our goal here was not to doubt whether these fiat or conventional uses exist, nor whether they make sense. Instead, this manuscript aimed to raise doubt about the notion that the phrase ‘aesthetic judgment’ stands for some significant or distinctive kind of judgment that merits its own investigation and theorization.

One broadly shared standard for ascertaining whether a definition is successful is the *Aristotelian* framework, which aims to define terms in accordance with its parent term (i.e., A is a B that Cs). In this context, a successful definition of ‘aesthetic judgment’ must first and foremost denote what differentiates it from its parent term: ‘judgment’. That is, what specifies the ‘aesthetic’, or the ‘C’. We believe that we have shown that three common approaches to defining ‘aesthetic judgment’ (content, phenomenology, and cognitive) fail to give explicit, informative accounts as to how ‘aesthetic judgment’ can be defined as a distinctive subtype of judgment.

One potential way to get around this conundrum is to reject or abandon the *Aristotelian* framework for understanding concepts in the tradition of the species-genus relationship (i.e., not framing “aesthetic judgment” as a subtype of “judgment”). For example, in his forthcoming article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, James Shelley seems to present an alternate way of understanding the species-genus relationship in his analysis of aesthetic value. We don’t take the arguments given here to rule out the possibility that such an analysis could be given to aesthetic judgment.[[17]](#footnote-18)

In addition, this paper has (of course) not shown that there cannot be a successful *Aristotelian* definition in the future. We do think we demonstrate, however, that up to this point in history it seems that mainstream work in philosophy of aesthetic judgment has failed to offer a clear definition of the term (i.e., failed to show what distinguishes aesthetic judgment from other judgment types). This lack of a clear definition of aesthetic judgment impacts empirical attempts to shed light on such judgments: it is common for neuro-aesthetic researchers to show individuals a variety of image types (portraits, abstract art, still-life, landscapes) when attempting to understand aesthetic judgment. Yet, as we have seen, some philosophers of aesthetics reject a position on which individuals make aesthetic judgments of natural objects. Therefore, they would presumably reject any conclusions drawn from studies that make use of natural landscapes or human faces to understand aesthetic judgment. As a result, it is unclear what might even count as progress in the field.

In their essay “The Context Principle”, psychologists Lisa Feldman, Batja Mesquita, and Eliot Smith (2013) offer up the following quote from William James as a kind of warning to their colleagues: “Whenever we have made a word . . . to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name” (1890, p. 195). In this quote, James is warning us about making what is known as the *fallacy of reification*, namely, when an abstract term is assumed to correspond to a real and discrete entity in the world.[[18]](#footnote-19) It seems to us that philosophers may have fallen into the trap that James (and others) have sought to warn us about: our use of the phrase ‘aesthetic judgment’ has led philosophers to posit a substantive or real entity to correspond to that term when, perhaps, no such entity exists.

We do not necessarily take the argument offered here to impact all or many of the questions typically investigated within the field of aesthetics (or philosophy of art, for that matter). However, we do believe that the evidence considered here suggests that any attempt at defining aesthetic judgment (i.e., successfully demarcating it from judgment simplicitor or other judgment types) runs the risk of being a futile enterprise. Perhaps philosophers would be better served by attempting to understand *judgment* and from there, perhaps, we might be able to subdivide the category. However, we should prepare ourselves for the possibility that those subcategories may not match up neatly with our pre-existing concepts.

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1. For an overview of some of the relevant disputes, see Ginsborg (2019) and Zangwill (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://philpapers.org/browse/aesthetic-judgment>; https://philpapers.org/browse/aesthetic-experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Although Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley do not explicitly discuss Aristotelian definitions, they do discuss what is needed to create a proper taxonomy, which does rely on such a definitional schema. See also Sackris and Larsen (2022) for a discussion of attempts to define moral judgment and a rejection of such attempts. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley (2014) for an overview of the content approach to defining moral judgments as well as why they see it as falling short. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. He does *not* say that other judgment types do not make use of taste, so it is not clear that he is even offering this as a defining feature. Second, to say that aesthetic judgments require aesthetic sensitivity is not very illuminating. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Notably, many authors *have* doubted that moral judgments can in fact be given a content-based definition. See for example Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatly (2012). The following meta-ethicists have expressed general doubts about our ability to define what constitutes a moral judgment: G.E. Moore (1903), Dreier (1996), Flanagan (1993), Shafer-Landau (2015). For an extended discussion, see [removed for blind review]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Lopes uses “aesthetic value” in the same way that others use “aesthetic property”. This is discussed further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. In regards to the nature of aesthetic values, Lopes maintains that aesthetic value facts ultimately “bottom out” in non-aesthetic value facts (2018, p. 192). He also states that “facts grounded in natural facts are also natural facts. Ergo aesthetic value facts are natural facts” (2018, 191). If aesthetic value facts are mere natural facts, it is not clear why we need a term to designate them, nor how they differ from other “natural facts” or other “value facts”. E.g., what is the difference between “being symmetrical” and “being beautiful”? Lopes says nothing to illuminate this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See also Prinz, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For an overview, see Matravers (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. On the pro side, see for example Ball, 1965; on the con side see for example Beardsley, 1974; Sibley, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. We owe this objection to anonymous reviewer. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Notice that these authors take food to *not* be included in the list of objects that might admit of aesthetic judgment. This indicates the general confusion in the field, and why it is so difficult to identify if there is such a thing as aesthetic judgment: there isn’t even agreement on which objects we should investigate to discover it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See McManus (2011) for a discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. For an overview of the recent relationship between philosophy of aesthetics and cognitive science/experimental inquiry, see Cova et al., (2015); Meskin et al., (2018); Stokes (2009); Shimamura and Palmer (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Vessel et al. (2018) found evidence that supports the conclusions of Kawabata and Zeki in a survey study they conducted. There they found much greater intersubjective agreement in the judgment of faces and landscapes as beautiful or ugly, while the judgment of artifacts yielded much less intersubjective agreement. This seems to suggest that different cognitive systems are being called upon in the evaluations. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Shelley’s work draws on Anton Ford’s (2011) discussion of the species-genus relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. John Stuart Mill made a similar remark: “The tendency has always been strong to believe that whatever received a name must be an entity or thing, having an independent existence of its own; and if no real entity answering to the name could be found, men did not for that reason suppose that none existed, but imagined that it was something peculiarly abstruse and mysterious, too high to be an object of sense. The meaning of all general, and especially of all abstract terms, became in this way enveloped in a mystical base...” From the notes by John Stuart Mill (1869) regarding his reading of "Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind" (1829) by James Mill. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)