**Aesthetic Reasons and the Demands They (Do Not) Make**

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**Abstract**

What does the aesthetic ask of us? What claims do the aesthetic features of the objects and events in our environment make on us? My answer in this paper is: that depends. Aesthetic reasons can only justify feelings – they cannot demand them. A corollary of this is that there are no aesthetic obligations to feel, only permissions. However, I argue, aesthetic reasons can demand actions – they do not merely justify them. A corollary of this is that there are aesthetic obligations to act, not only permissions. So, I conclude, the aesthetic asks little of us as patients and much of as agents.

1. **Introduction**

Normative reasons are considerations that play (at least) the following roles: justifying, guiding, and explaining. The fact that Miyuki promised to go the cinema might justify her in going, at least to some extent, and she (or another person) might cite that fact when justifying her behaviour. That Miyuki promised might guide her deliberations as to what to do this evening, and might figure as a premise in reasoning which concludes with her going to the cinema. Finally, that Miyuki promised to go might explain why she ought to go, or why there is some reason for her to go.

Among the normative reasons are *aesthetic* reasons, reasons provided by (or suitably related to) aesthetic properties, such as balance, dullness, grace, simplicity, vibrancy, garishness, discord, and the like. I take there to be aesthetic reasons for feelings (emotions or affective responses), beliefs (and judgements), and actions (and intentions and decisions).[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, one and the same consideration might be a reason for all of the above. For example, that the frame is not parallel to the picture rail might be a reason to feel displeased, to judge that the picture is crooked, and to rehang it. To keep things manageable, I will set aside belief, and focus on aesthetic reasons for feelings and actions.

I start this paper by introducing a meta-normative distinction between two sorts of reasons: justifying and demanding.[[2]](#footnote-2) Having done so, I descend to the first-order and defend the substantive view that aesthetic reasons for feelings are only ever justifying – there are no aesthetic reasons that demand feeling. In contrast, I argue, aesthetic reasons for actions are not only ever justifying – there are aesthetic reasons that demand action. A corollary of this is that there are no aesthetic obligations to feel, only aesthetic permissions, though there are aesthetic obligations to act. The upshot is that the aesthetic domain is disunified, but the disunity is one of substance, not structure.

Before proceeding to the main discussion, I will address two preliminary matters. First, there is a tradition according to which aesthetic normativity is not action-guiding.[[3]](#footnote-3) While aesthetic considerations bear on the question of what to feel, they do not bear on the question of how to act. In opposition to this, King invites us to:

Think […] of the decisions we make about our personal appearances. Which shoes? Which color shirt? We decide to cut our hair a certain way based on its look and to pick certain soaps over others because they simply smell nicer. We consider aesthetics when we compose an essay or a talk in trying to weigh clarity, simplicity, elegance, and wit. (2018: 638-639, see also Lopes 2018: ch. 2)

In view of such examples, I take the proposal that the aesthetic concerns us only as patients, not as agents, to have no intuitive appeal. I set it aside in what follows.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Second, talk of aesthetic obligations and permissions is here simply a convenient way of talking of what a person should or may do aesthetically speaking, which in turn is understood in terms of the balance of aesthetic reasons. Some understand aesthetic obligations in a more heavyweight fashion – as duties that are owed to someone or something, as backed by law or sanctions, as accompanied by guilt or remorse in cases of non-compliance, or as in some way particularly serious (see Cross 2017b, Eaton 2008, Hampshire 1954, Harman 1977: 59, Kubala 2018). As I use the term ‘obligation’, it carries none of these associations; again, it just picks out a status, what a person ought to do, determined by the relevant aesthetic considerations. That is not to deny that there are heavyweight aesthetic obligations – or that the question of what grounds them is an important one – only that they are the present concern. Lopes claims that it is a ‘mistake […] to assume that shoulds and oughts necessarily concern serious business, generating dilemmas and threatening Furies’ reprisal’ (2018: 40). Whether that is a mistake in general, it is in this context.

1. **Justifying versus demanding**

Among reasons for action, one can distinguish reasons that merely justify actions (to some degree) and reasons that do not merely justify actions but also demand them (to some degree).[[5]](#footnote-5) More carefully, the distinction is among reason-relations – justifying and demanding are different relations considerations can stand in to actions. It is consistent with this that the same consideration might figure in both relations, or in one relation in one context and another in another.

I will first illustrate the justifying/demanding distinction with some examples from the non-aesthetic realm, and then offer a more principled way of drawing it. The aim in doing so is a modest one. There are no doubt alternative ways to capture what is going on in the examples and challenges to the relevant principles. I am not trying here to establish that the distinction holds, but simply to bring it into view. In this paper, I take for granted that there are two reason-relations and ask in which aesthetic considerations stand and when.[[6]](#footnote-6) Here are the examples:

I own the car parked outside. That seems to justify my driving it, but not to demand it. The car is blocking my neighbour’s drive. That seems, not merely to justify my driving it, but also to demand it.

The bridge will bear my weight. That seems to justify my crossing it, but not to demand it. Someone on the other side of the river needs my help. That seems, not merely to justify crossing the bridge, but also to demand it.

I am not allergic to peanuts. That seems to justify me in eating some peanuts, but not to demand it. You are allergic to peanuts. That seems to demand that you not eat the peanuts, and not only to justify you in refraining from doing so.

I am playing *Monopoly*. I land on the Electric Company, and no one owns it. That seems to justify me in purchasing the utility, but not to demand that I do so. Then I land on Income Tax. That seems to demand that I pay £200, not merely to justify me in doing so.

These examples are supposed to afford an intuitive purchase on the justifying/demanding distinction. However, you do not need to accept my verdicts on the cases. I take the distinction to be a meta-normative one. It is a substantive matter which considerations, if any, fall on either side of it. In view of this, here is a more principled way of drawing the distinction.

Justifying and demanding reasons can be distinguished in terms of their relationships to, respectively, permissions and obligations (cp. Gert 2003). Demanding reasons can make it the case that a person ought to do something. Justifying reasons, in contrast, can only make it the case that a person may do something. More carefully, if there is a conclusive demanding reason for a person to act, it follows that they ought to do so. In contrast, if there is a conclusive justifying reason for a person to act, it does not follow that they ought to do so, only that they may do so. To illustrate, the fact that the bridge will bear my weight might explain why I may cross it, but not why I ought to do so. In contrast, the fact that someone on the other side of the bridge needs my help might explain why I ought to cross it, and not just why I may do so.

The considerations that merely justify and those that also demand both deserve the label ‘reason’, since both play the justifying, guiding, and explanatory roles characteristic of reasons. Reflection on the examples confirms this. However, if someone wants to reserve the name ‘reason’ for one sort of consideration, say, the demanding sort, and use a different name for the other, that is fine with me. The terminology does not matter.[[7]](#footnote-7)

I have drawn the distinction among reasons for action, but it extends to reasons for attitudes, including feelings. Moreover, I motivated the distinction by thinking about non-aesthetic examples, but it extends to the aesthetic realm. In the remainder, I explore these extensions.

1. **The argument from taste**

Reflection on taste might support the claim that aesthetic considerations only provide justifying, as opposed to demanding, reasons for feeling.

It is a platitude that different people have different tastes. Moreover, two people (or the same person at different times) can respond in different ways to the same object in a way that is faultless.[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, the curve of a bay window might charm one person and leave another indifferent. Arguably, that there is room for such divergence is a central feature of our thought and talk about the aesthetic domain.

Compare: ‘Nothing is more characteristic of the aesthetic than being bored or repelled by what enthrals someone else’ (Moran 2012: 303). This might suggest that it is aesthetically permissible for two people to have opposing attitudes toward the same object. For present purposes, a weaker claim suffices. It is aesthetically permissible for one person to be bored (or enthralled) by something and for another not to be bored (or enthralled) by it. More generally, it is aesthetically permissible for one person to have an affective attitude toward an object and for another to lack it.

A straightforward explanation for this is that the reasons aesthetic features provide for having a certain feeling are justifying, not demanding. Since justifying reasons can only make it the case that a person may feel a certain way, not that they ought to do so, it follows that it is only ever the case that a person is permitted to respond to those aesthetic features, not that they are obliged to do so. So, if one person feels a certain way about something in light of its aesthetic features and another person does not, it need not follow that either person is feeling something they ought not to feel, or failing to feel something they ought to feel. A person’s taste, then, manifests in the justifying aesthetic reasons to which they respond with feeling.

This line of thought is suggestive but not decisive. A reply is to grant that, for those without the relevant taste, the reason for feeling an aesthetic feature provides is at most justifying, but to insist that, for those with the relevant taste, the reason is demanding. One way to gloss this is by appeal to the distinction between reasons and conditions (see Bader 2016, Dancy 2004). To illustrate, the fact that Miyuki can go to the cinema is not a reason for her to go, but it enables the fact that she promised to do so to be a reason for going. In a similar fashion, one might view taste as an enabling condition: it enables a consideration that would not otherwise be a demanding reason for feeling to be one. On this view, if a person has the relevant taste, it might be the case that they ought to respond affectively to aesthetic properties, not simply that they may do so. In turn, this promises to explain the room for divergence. If elegance is to a person’s taste, then the curve of the window demands that they take delight in; if not, then it does not. In a related context, McGonigal writes, ‘Some [aesthetic reasons] may be conditional on our having cultivated a particular aesthetic sensibility, but that is compatible with their having an authoritative, binding force’ (2018: 932).[[9]](#footnote-9) The suggestion here is that a person’s sensibility conditions a consideration’s status as a reason for feeling with demanding, as opposed to merely justifying, force.

Since reflection on the role of taste in the aesthetic domain is inconclusive, I will turn to another argument for thinking that aesthetic reasons only justify feelings. For the remainder, I will assume that any taste condition is met in the cases under consideration.

1. **The argument from excess**

Aesthetic properties can be more or less fine-grained.[[10]](#footnote-10) Aesthetic feelings – responses to aesthetic properties – can be more or less fine-grained. For each aesthetic property, there is what I will call *a matching attitude*, that is, a response as fine-grained. For example, that it has a brass handle and chrome hinges is a respect in which the cupboard door is dissatisfying to some extent. The matching attitude is dissatisfaction toward that feature of the door to that extent. Another example: that a cushion on an otherwise dull sofa is vibrantly coloured is a respect in which the furnishings are delightful to some degree. The matching attitude is delight toward that feature of the furnishings to that degree.

Every aesthetic property provides a reason for a matching attitude.[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, that it has a brass handle and chrome hinges is a reason to feel dissatisfaction toward that feature of the door to the relevant extent. Likewise, the vibrancy of the cushion is a reason to feel delight toward that feature of the furnishings to the relevant degree.

When an aesthetic property provides a reason for a matching attitude, there is no reason as weighty not to have the matching attitude. If the question is whether to have some more coarse-grained response, for example, to feel overall delight regarding the furnishings, then there might be reasons more or less weighty for and against. The fact that the cushion is vibrantly coloured is a reason to be delighted about the furnishings, while the fact that the sofa is dominated by an elaborate throw is a reason not to be delighted. However, the situation is different when it comes to reasons for matching attitudes, since they… well… match!

In view of this, suppose that the reasons aesthetic features provide for feelings are demanding. In that case, it follows that, for every aesthetic feature, one ought to have the matching attitude. In any situation, there are innumerably many aesthetic properties.[[12]](#footnote-12) To make this vivid, consider the façade of the house. Each element (each brick, doorframe, pane of glass, tile, etc.) will possess one or more aesthetically relevant features, positive or negative, and each combination of those elements in turn will possess aesthetically relevant features, and each combination of those combinations in turn will possess aesthetically relevant features, and so on. Since any situation involves innumerably many aesthetic properties, it follows that, in any situation, there are innumerably many matching attitudes one ought to have. So, the assumption that aesthetic reasons for feelings are demanding leads to an explosion of aesthetic obligations, indeed, an explosion of obligations that each person fails to satisfy.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This strikes me as an implausible result. But it gets worse.

“Ought”s agglomerate. If a person ought to φ and ought to ψ, they ought to φ and ψ. For example, if I ought to give £10 to Miguel and I ought to give £10 to Nadia, I ought to give £10 to Miguel and £10 to Nadia. So, if the reasons for feeling aesthetic properties provide are demanding, then, for any situation, there is not simply an obligation, for every matching attitude, to have it, but also an obligation to have every matching attitude. However, it is false that we have such an obligation. Given our limited capacities for feeling, it is not possible to have every matching attitude. Given *ought implies can*, according to which a person ought to φ only if they able to φ, it is not the case that a person ought to have very matching attitude.

This line of thought shows that aesthetic reasons for feeling are not demanding. The reasons aesthetic features provide only justify feelings.[[14]](#footnote-14) So, there are affective responses one may have, among them matching attitudes, but none that one ought to have (contrast Gorodeisky Forthcoming-b: 10). This allows for an explosion of aesthetic permissions, of course, but that does not strike me as an implausible result. Moreover, “may”s do not agglomerate. If Vera may accept the job offer and Vera may decline the job offer, it does not follow that Vera may accept and decline the job offer. So, if aesthetic reasons for feelings are justifying, it does not follow that a person may have all the matching attitudes.[[15]](#footnote-15)

I do not deny that there are demanding aesthetic reasons *against* feelings, that is, reasons provide by aesthetic features that demand that a person not feel a certain way. If the fact that it has a brass handle and chrome hinges is a respect in which the cupboard door is dissatisfying to some extent, it is also a reason not to be satisfied by that feature of the door to that extent. By the same token, I do not deny that there are aesthetic obligations not to have certain emotional responses. While this allows for innumerable aesthetic obligations of a negative kind, this too is not an implausible result. It is possible for finite creatures such as ourselves to satisfy each such obligation, and the obligation that results from their agglomeration, simply by not having the relevant feelings.

The argument above relies on the principle that *ought implies can*. One might object that this is controversial.[[16]](#footnote-16) That is true. Nothing in philosophy is uncontroversial. But it is a widely held principle and even its critics acknowledge its intuitive plausibility. So, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend the principle, I think it is legitimate to appeal to it in this context. In any event, there are independent grounds for doubting that a person ought to have each and every matching attitude, hence, that aesthetic reasons for feelings are demanding.

First, consider the link between what a person ought to do and criticism. If a person ought to φ and does not φ, they are criticisable, unless they have an excuse.[[17]](#footnote-17) But a person is not open to criticism or in need of an excuse for lacking one or all of the matching attitudes (as distinct from having an *un*matching attitude). So, it is not the case that they ought to have one or all of the matching attitudes.

Second, consider retrospective attitudes of assessment. If Miyuki ought to have gone to the cinema but did not, she might say or think to herself, “I should have kept my promise!” If a person realises that they did not have a matching attitude to some of the aesthetic features of the façade of the house, or for that matter to all of them, they would not say or think to themselves, “I should have done so!”

Finally, consider the link between what a person ought to do and advice (cp. Thomson 2000). Suppose that Carlos does not know that his friend Juan will be at the party, but Maria does know this. She might tell Carlos, “You should go to the party!” In contrast, a third-party with full(er) information about the aesthetic features of the façade of a house would not advise someone, with respect to each of the matching attitudes, to have it, let alone to have all of them.

In conclusion, the view that aesthetic reasons for feelings are demanding makes the aesthetic domain too demanding.

1. **Resisting the argument from excess**

There are two ways to resist the argument for the view that no aesthetic reasons for affects are demanding. The first is to maintain that all such reasons are demanding, but deny that this results in an explosion of obligations. The second is to deny that all aesthetic reasons to feel are demanding, but insist that *some* are. I cannot discuss here every possible way of developing these defensive strategies, but I will consider some of the most obvious and, I think, most promising ways of doing so, and suggest that they fail.

* 1. **Cost-cutting**

A person who wants to defend the view that aesthetic reasons for feeling are demanding might allow for an explosion of such reasons but deny that there follows an explosion of aesthetic obligations. To do so, they might challenge the claim that, if there is an aesthetic reason for a matching attitude, there is no reason as weighty against that attitude. Perhaps there are no competing *aesthetic* reasons but there might be competing *non-aesthetic* reasons (see Gorodeisky Forthcoming-a: 7-8, Forthcoming-b: 9).[[18]](#footnote-18) So, even if aesthetic reasons for feeling are demanding, it might not follow that a person ought to have each matching attitude, or all of them together. In a typical context, those reasons are outweighed by considerations of cost, including, but not limited to, psychological cost.[[19]](#footnote-19)

By way of response, consider the distinction between object-given and state-given reasons for and against attitudes.[[20]](#footnote-20) To illustrate, the fact that the dog is rabid is an object-given reason to fear the dog – a reason provided by the object of fear, or what is feared, namely, the dog. In contrast, the fact that fearing the dog will improve your flight reaction is a state-given reason to fear the dog – a reason provided by the fear itself. To return to the issue at hand, cost-based are state-given, not object-given, reasons against feelings. That it is costly to feel dissatisfaction toward the cupboard door is a feature, not of the object of dissatisfaction, that is, the door, but of the dissatisfaction itself.

Many deny that state-given reasons are reasons in anything but name, that they are genuine reasons. One grounds for doing so is that there is a response constraint on reasons: that p is a reason for a person to φ only if they can φ for the reason that p (Gibbons 2013, Kelly 2002, Kolodny 2005, Parﬁt 2011: 51, Raz 2011, Shah 2006, Williams 1981: ch. 8).[[21]](#footnote-21) State-given reasons of the above sort seem not to satisfy this constraint. You can fear the dog for the reason that it is rabid, but you cannot fear the dog for the reason that it will improve your flight reaction. Nor, for that matter, can you refrain from fearing the dog in light of the fact that you have been offered a reward not to do so, or for the reason that fearing it will be costly in some other way. Similarly, you cannot withhold dissatisfaction toward the door for the reason that it will use up limited psychological resources. If state-given reasons are not genuine reasons, then considerations of cost are not reasons against matching attitudes.

Whether there are state-given reasons is controversial. Fortunately, there are further points that speak against the reply under consideration. The cost of any individual matching attitude is negligible. Hence, the weight of the reason it provides is negligible. So, the cost-based reason against having a matching attitude will not be as weighty as the reason the aesthetic feature provides for having it.[[22]](#footnote-22) But that is all we need to get the conclusion that one ought to have the matching attitude and, by agglomeration, that we ought to have them all. So, the point about costs does not forestall the original objection.

One might suggest that cost-based reason against feelings are in general as or more weighty than the aesthetic reasons for them. But, first, that is a substantive commitment to take on, one which does not have independent plausibility. Second, on this view, even if aesthetic reasons are demanding, it is only ever the case that a person may have the matching attitude, since there is always a reason of the same or greater weight against doing so. So, this suggestion concedes the main point, namely, that there are no aesthetic obligations, only permissions.

Finally, I can simply stipulate that costs are not relevant. Consider a subject with an unlimited capacity for feeling for whom the matching attitudes are not costly in the relevant sense. The points about criticism, retrospective assessments, and third-party advice still hold when considering such a subject. So, the appeal to costs does little to support the idea that aesthetic reasons for affective attitudes are demanding, hence, that there are aesthetic obligations.

* 1. **Epistemic constraints**

I turn now to a second attempt to maintain that aesthetic reasons to feel are demanding while denying that this leads to a surfeit of aesthetic obligations, one that appeals to a further constraint on reasons. I have in mind here the idea that some consideration provides a reason, hence, bears on what a person ought to do, only if it satisfies some epistemic condition or, to use Dancy’s memorable phrase (2000: 56), passes through an ‘epistemic filter’.[[23]](#footnote-23) One might think that, with such a constraint in place, there will not be an explosion of aesthetic obligations. While aesthetic reasons for affective attitudes are demanding, the filter serves to limit the number of considerations that place those demands.

The view that reasons or obligations are epistemically constrained is controversial.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in the relevant debates. For now, then, I will point out that, as the view is often developed, it does not block the argument from excess.

What exactly is the epistemic constraint? Theorists differ on this, but a prominent proposal is this: that p is a reason for a person to φ only if they are in a position to know that p. This constraint is too weak to block the argument from excess. After all, it is met in cases like that of the house façade. It is plausible that, for each of the innumerably many aesthetically relevant features, the person *is* in a position to know that it obtains, say, by focusing their attention on it.[[25]](#footnote-25) So, innumerably many of those features pass through the epistemic filter and provide a reason for the matching attitude.

Consider then a stronger constraint: that p is a reason for a person to φ only if they experience that p. This proposal might seem especially tempting in relation to the aesthetic domain. As Moran says:

An idea that recurs in the history of aesthetics [is] that what is regarded as beautiful is not experienced as a passive thing or as something that merely produces an effect in us but rather as inviting or requiring something from us, a response that may be owed to it. (2012: 313, see also Kubala 2018)

Part of the idea here is that an aesthetic feature provides a demanding reason for a person to feel *when* experienced. The present proposal is that an aesthetic feature provides a demanding reason for a person to feel *only when* experienced.

Given the richness of perceptual experience, this constraint will not block the argument from excess. In a very different context, Heck writes about the fecundity of what is given in perceptual experience:

Consider your current perceptual state – and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job. […] Before me now, for example, are arranged various objects with various shapes and colors, of which, it might seem, I have no concept. My desk exhibits a whole host of shades of brown, for which I have no names. The speakers to the sides of my computer are not quite flat; I could not begin to describe their shape in anything like adequate terms. The leaves on the trees outside my window are fluttering back and forth, randomly, as it seems to me, as the wind passes over them. – Yet my experience of these things represents them far more precisely than that, far more distinctively, it would seem, than any other characterization I could hope to formulate, for myself or for others, in terms of the concepts I presently possess. (2000: 489-490)

The issue at hand is not whether a given experience reveals more features, indeed, more aesthetically relevant features, than a person can conceptualise, but whether it reveals more features than a person can match in their attitudes. Plausibly, it does.

A defender of the view that aesthetic reasons for feeling are demanding might suggest a stricter epistemic constraint on what it is to be a reason than those considered above. But then their view becomes even more controversial. The burden is on them to provide independent motivation for the constraint.

* 1. **Paying attention**

I turn now to the second way of resisting the argument from excess. One might grant that the argument shows that not all aesthetic reasons for affective attitudes are demanding, but it is consistent with this that some such reasons are demanding.

The proponent of this view owes an account of what distinguishes demanding reasons to feel from merely justifying reasons. That difference does not lie in the *content* of the reasons. After all, each is, or is provided by, an aesthetic feature. And it is obscure why being dazzling to such-and-such degree would demand being dazzled to that degree, say, while being charming to such-and-such degree would only justify being charmed to that degree. In view of this, I suggest that, on the most plausible version of this view, the difference between the demanding and justifying aesthetic reasons to feel lies, not in their content, but in the presence or absence of further conditions that enable or disable their demandingness. On this view, being dazzling to such-and-such degree might demand being dazzled to that degree in some circumstances, and merely justify it in others.

The obvious candidate for the relevant condition, one with sufficient generality, is *attention*. With respect to the beautiful – although the point generalises to the balanced, the graceful, the vibrant, and so on – Moran suggests that ‘anyone attending to it properly ought to respond with pleasure and admiration’ (2012: 305). To put this in the terms of the present discussion: In many cases, the reasons to feel aesthetic features provide are merely justifying but, when a person is attending to those features (or their bearer), the reasons are demanding. Hence, that person ought to have the relevant feelings.[[26]](#footnote-26) Importantly, this view will not imply an explosion of aesthetic obligations, since people will not (cannot) attend to each of the many aesthetically relevant features.

I am not convinced that a person ought to have the feeling the aesthetic reasons support, even when attending. First, they might be attending to aesthetically relevant features, but their interest might lie elsewhere. Consider someone looking carefully at the fixtures of the cupboard door with a view to ascertaining its monetary value. This might involve, even require, attending to its aesthetically relevant properties – indeed, attending to them *as* aesthetically relevant – but it is implausible that the person in this context is under normative pressure to have the relevant feelings, let alone that they ought to do so.

Second, another option is available to a person attending to aesthetic features, namely, to cease attending, rather than have the relevant feeling. This observation casts doubt on the claim that attending is a condition that enables aesthetic features to provide demanding reasons. Compare: if Miyuki promises to go the cinema, there is a demanding reason for her to go. Suppose that, instead of going to the cinema, Miyuki makes it the case that she cannot do so. As a result, Miyuki’s promise is no longer a demanding reason. In this case, Miyuki is criticisable: she is being evasive and manifesting a lack of concern for fidelity. Examples like this point to a general principle:[[27]](#footnote-27)

If there is a demanding reason to φ, there is a demanding reason not to ψ, where ψing disables the reason for φing.

One might object to this. Suppose that Miyuki breaks her promise to go to the cinema. This is a demanding reason to make reparations. Instead, Miyuki secures forgiveness. As a result, the broken promise is no longer a reason to make reparations. In this case, Miyuki disables a reason but is not criticisable.

However, the principle states only that there is *a* demanding reason not to disable demanding reasons. It is consistent with this that in some cases there are reasons as or more weighty for doing so, hence, that in some cases it is permissible to disable demanding reasons. So, the example of seeking forgiveness is not a counterexample to the above principle.

To return to the issue at hand, in the aesthetic case, I suggest, it is acceptable for the subject to stop attending. If a person is looking at the colourful cushion, for example, they might simply look away. This need not be a cause for criticism; it need not betray a lack of taste for vibrancy. Nor might it reveal a greater concern for something else. So, given the above principle, attending is not an enabler for a demanding aesthetic reason.

One might object that there are circumstances in which there is an aesthetic obligation, hence, demanding aesthetic reasons, to attend to an item or its features (see Kubala 2018, Moran 2012). Remarks such as, “You have to look at the magnolia by the back door while it’s still in bloom!” or, “You must take note of their new haircut!” are commonplace. If a person aesthetically ought to attend, they are open to criticism if they fail to do so.

The point is well taken. But it does not support the view under consideration, namely, that attention (as such) conditions aesthetic reasons for feeling, specifically, by turning them from justifying to demanding. Still, perhaps the point leads to a different proposal, namely, that *reasons* for attention condition aesthetic reasons for affects. When there is a demanding aesthetic reason for a person to attend to something, then the reasons to feel which its aesthetic features provide are demanding, hence, they ought to have those feelings.

Attending is a (mental or non-mental) action. For example, attending to the magnolia might involve looking at its petals, following their outlines, comparing their colours to those of their neighbours, and so on. So, aesthetic reasons to attend are aesthetic reasons to act. I do not deny that there are such reasons – indeed, I will argue that there are shortly. What I do deny is that aesthetic reasons to attend condition aesthetic reasons to feel in the way suggested. Suppose that Vanya ought to look at the magnolia but does not. She is criticisable for this failure. But she is not in addition criticisable for, say, not relishing the sumptuousness of its petals. Indeed, given that she did not attend to the magnolia, such criticism seems inappropriate. So, it is not the case that Vanya ought to have affective attitudes that match the magnolia’s aesthetic features. So, even though there is a demanding reason for her to attend, there is none for her to feel.

At this point, the opponent of the argument from excess might protest. What if Vanya attends to the magnolia, but fails to relish its sumptuous petals? In that case, she is criticisable. Since she conformed to the reasons that demand attention, she must be criticisable for not conforming to the reasons that demand feeling.

However, it is not the case that Vanya conformed to the reasons that demand attention. Those reasons, I take it, are not merely reasons to attend, but reasons to do so in a way that results, at the very least, in relishing the magnolia’s sumptuous petals. More generally, demanding aesthetic reasons to attend are aesthetic reasons for actions that result in matching attitudes. So, there is no need to postulate demanding reasons for feeling to explain why a person who attends to an object without forming the relevant feelings is open to criticism.

* 1. **A final objection**

I have considered some ways of resisting the argument for the view that aesthetic reasons to feel are only ever justifying. No doubt there are more ways of doing so, but I take myself to have done enough to show that that argument deserves serious consideration. By way of a segue, I turn to an objection which targets the conclusion directly, rather than the route to it.

One might object to the claim that there are no aesthetic obligations to have affective attitudes by pointing out that, in some contexts, it does seem acceptable to say such things as, “You should admire the way they’ve arranged the furniture in this room!”

No doubt it is okay to talk this way. But one might view this as loose talk. Compare: “You should grow your hair!” This is not literally true. Hair growth is not reason-responsive. What this remark is intended to convey is something like: you should not cut your hair or, more generally, you should take actions to ensure your hair grows or refrain from taking actions that prevent it from doing so. Returning now to the remark about the furniture, I suggest that, while false, it might nonetheless convey a truth, namely, that you should take actions to bring about admiration, which might include attending to the arrangement of the furniture. This assumes, of course, that there are aesthetic reasons for action, indeed, aesthetic reasons that demand acting. I turn to that now.

1. **Aesthetic reasons for action**

So far, I have argued that the reasons aesthetic features provide for feelings are only ever justifying, not demanding. Hence, there are no aesthetic obligations to feel, only aesthetic permissions. The case of action is, I suggest, different. There is a simple argument for thinking that there are demanding aesthetic reasons for acting, hence, that there are aesthetic obligations to act:[[28]](#footnote-28)

Aesthetic features are values.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Values are demanding reasons for acting.

So, features are demanding reasons for acting.

I take the first step of the argument to be uncontroversial. Aesthetic features are such features as elegance, grace, beauty, and harmony. These are values.[[30]](#footnote-30) A more careful statement of the second step is:

If φing preserves some value, there is a demanding reason to φ.[[31]](#footnote-31)

For example, if autonomy is a value, and giving Tanya a vote preserves her autonomy, that is a demanding reason to give Tanya a vote. If welfare is a value, and giving Isadora antibiotics preserves her welfare, that is a demanding reason to give Isadora antibiotics. It is controversial whether there are demanding reasons to *promote* value (see Anderson 1993, Scanlon 1998), but it should be uncontroversial that there are demanding reasons to preserve it.

The fact that φing preserves some *aesthetic* value is, then, a demanding aesthetic reason for φing. If filling in the cracks preserves the elegance of the bay window, there is a demanding reason to fill the cracks. If washing the cushion preserves its vibrancy, there is a demanding reason to wash the cushion. If there are demanding aesthetic reasons, they can make it the case that a person ought to act, that is, that there are aesthetic obligations.

This contrasts with aesthetic reasons for feeling. Features such as delicacy, vibrancy, and balance are values. But they do not provide demanding reasons for feelings, or so I argued above. But, one might ask, don’t those arguments carry across? No, as I will explain below.

Before doing so, I should stress that I do not deny that there are (merely) justifying aesthetic reasons to act. Lopes (2018), in contrast, seems committed to the claim that all aesthetic reasons for acting are (in my terms) demanding. On his view, an aesthetic reason for acting – at least, one provided by a value such as grace or wit – is a fact which ‘lends weight’ to the proposition that a person ought (aesthetically) to act (Lopes 2018: 38).[[32]](#footnote-32) As noted above, merely justifying reasons need not do this; they need bear only on what a person may do.

It is not my aim here to engage critically with the view emerging from Lopes’s work, only to note that nothing I say here entails or assumes it.[[33]](#footnote-33) It is consistent with the above argument that some aesthetic reasons to act are merely justifying. Perhaps reasons to act in ways that promote aesthetic values are like this. If placing the vase on the bulky mantlepiece would accentuate its delicacy, that is a justifying reason to place the vase there. If sprinkling slices of radish on the tacos would make the dish more vibrant, that is a justifying reason to add the radish. And if telling a person that their tie matches their shirt means that they will wear that combination again, that is a justifying reason to pay the compliment. Again, I do not commit to these claims here – the point is that the argument leaves room for them.

* 1. **Excess revisited**

There is an explosion of aesthetically relevant features. If those features are, or ground, values, then there is an explosion of aesthetic reasons for acting. If those reasons are demanding, isn’t there an explosion of aesthetic obligations to act?

First, as discussed above, considerations of cost do not provide reasons against affective attitudes. In contrast, considerations of cost *do* provide reasons against acting. In general, the cost of acting is a disvalue. So, if it is costly to act, there is a reason not to act. For example, filling in the cracks on the bay window might be at the expense of writing this paper, or spending time with friends. So, even if there is a demanding reason to fill the cracks, insofar as it preserves the elegance of the window, there are cost-based considerations against doing so.

Second, different affective attitudes are compatible in the sense that having one does not preclude having the other. As a result, one can settle the question of whether to have that attitude independently of whether to have some other attitude. In contrast, different actions may be incompatible, in the sense that performing one precludes performing the other. So, one cannot always settle the question of whether to perform one action independently of the whether to perform another.

To see the relevance of this, consider an example. The delightful juxtaposition of the yellow door and the grey paintwork might be a reason to preserve it, say, by varnishing the door, while the charming curve of the bay window might be a reason to preserve it, say, by filling in the cracks. However, preserving the one might rule out preserving the other. In that case, the reason for preserving the contrast is a reason against preserving the curve, and vice versa. So, while the two aesthetically valuable features provide two aesthetic reasons which demand acting, it does not follow that there are two aesthetic obligations to act. Whether the person ought to preserve the contrast or ought to preserve the curve (or neither) depends on how the reasons for each option weigh up, and how they weigh against the reasons for other options. If they ought to preserve the contrast, it is not the case that they ought to preserve the curve, and vice versa.

The upshot of this is that, while innumerably many aesthetic features give rise to innumerably many demanding aesthetic reasons, they do not give rise to innumerably many aesthetic obligations.

* 1. **Taste revisited**

One might think that a version of the argument from taste casts doubt on the claim that there are aesthetic obligations to act. If a value, such as grace or vibrancy, is not one the person has a taste for, it does not demand that they act.

When the original argument was introduced, I considered a reply to it. Even setting that reply aside, the argument is not convincing in relation to reasons for action. If gracefulness is a value, I make the world a better place than it would otherwise be by performing actions that preserve gracefulness. Of course, I might not make it better, or ensure it does not get worse, for *me* or *from my perspective*. Still, insofar as the action preserves the relevant value, there is a reason for me to act.

* 1. **Further support**

In support of the claim that there are aesthetic obligations to act, consider again criticism, retrospection, and advice. If a person fails to preserve the paint, they might be open to criticism.[[34]](#footnote-34) “You had the chance to do so,” a critic might say in an admonishing tone, “and now it’s ruined!” Looking back at their omission, the person might think to themselves, “I should have preserved the paint!” And, prior to this, a third-party with full(er) information might have advised them to do so.

1. **Conclusion**

There are aesthetic reasons for affective responses to aesthetic features – for example, admiration, delight, pleasure, and so on. Those reasons justify but do not demand such responses. Hence, it is not the case that we ought to have affective responses to aesthetic features, though we may do so.

In addition, there are aesthetic reasons to act. Those reasons do not only justify but also demand acting. Hence, it can be the case that we ought to act, specifically, to act so as to maintain aesthetic value, not only that we may do so.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The aesthetic, as one might put it, makes no demands on our feelings, but it makes many demands on our behaviour.[[36]](#footnote-36)

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1. What distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic reasons, and whether aesthetic reasons are fundamentally reasons for one kind of response (say, feeling) rather than others, are nice questions but not ones I explore here (see Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018, McGonigal 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I steer clear of other meta-normative issues, in particular, those concerning the prospects of aesthetic realism. For recent discussion, see (Hanson 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For expressions of this idea from within aesthetics and without, see, respectively, (Kivy 1980: 638-640) and (Harman 1977: 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a nice discussion of aesthetic agency, see (Ridley 2015). For an interesting contribution to the debate over whether the function of art criticism is to provide reasons for action, belief, or feeling, see (Cross 2017a). My focus here is on the realm of the aesthetic, which I take to overlap only partially with that of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A number of theorists draw something like this distinction, though they do not all use the same terms or motivate the distinction as I do (see Baier 1995, Dancy 2004, Gert 2003, Gert 2007, Greenspan 2005, Hurka and Shubert 2012, Scanlon 2014). Strandberg (2016), when assessing arguments for aesthetic non-cognitivism, appeals to it. His focus is on reasons for acting, not feeling, and he suggests that aesthetic considerations provide only justifying reasons for acting, which I deny below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. That said, I will later argue that appealing to the justifying/demanding distinction allows us to block some absurd conclusions. This provides support for thinking that that distinction is a genuine one. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Another point about terminology. To say that a reason is ‘demanding’ is not to say that it is serious, or that conformity to it is onerous, or that lying behind it is some person making a demand, or that it is decisive. It just to say that the reason bears on what a person ought to do, not only on what they may do. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This falls short of the claim that there is faultless aesthetic *disagreement*, which I take to concern disagreement in judgement. For discussion, see (Baker and Robson 2017, Lopes 2018, ch. 9, McGonigal 2018, Schafer 2010, Sundell 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. McGonigal is here responding to a broadly Kantian argument for the view that there are no aesthetic duties on the grounds, very roughly, that duties govern a person independently of their particular tastes (2018: 922-923). The main focus of that argument is duties to act, rather than duties to feel. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The points in this paragraph and the next echo points Maguire (2018) makes. However, Maguire makes those points when arguing for the view that there are no reasons, aesthetic or otherwise, for affective attitudes. This is not the place to respond to that argument. For criticism, see (Faraci 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It has been suggested to me that this claim is inconsistent with the sort of ‘holism’ about aesthetic reasons Sibley (2001, esp. ch.8) advances. How to interpret Sibley’s view is a matter of recent debate (see Bergqvist 2009, Kirwin 2011). It is not my aim here to settle exegetical matters. For present purposes, I note that all parties agree that Sibley holds the following view: an aesthetic feature that justifies a certain response considered on its own (*in vacuo*)might not favour, and might disfavour, that response when considered as part of a whole. (Compare Sibley on ‘inherently general aesthetic merits’ (2001: 108-109).) The dispute is over whether Sibley holds in addition that there are general principles that explain why a feature that is a reason for a response in one context might not be in another context. What I say in the main text is consistent with the point of agreement and neutral on the point of disagreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compare: ‘Anything that can be viewed is a fit object for aesthetic attention’ (Ziff 1984: 139). This claim concerns attention, which I discuss below, rather than feeling, but lying behind it is the idea that everything possesses aesthetic features. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Compare the arguments against positive epistemic obligations in (Nelson 2010) and (Whiting 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As noted above (n10), Maguire claims that there are no reasons for affective attitudes, only facts that make such attitudes fitting. Fit-making facts do not weigh against others in the way characteristic of reasons; instead, Maguire says, they ‘directly determine’ a normative status, namely, an affect’s being fitting. In passing, he adds that that status ‘is a kind of ought’ (2018: 780). Within Maguire’s framework, I could restate my conclusion as the claim that the normative status *is a kind of may*. Less obscurely: in the aesthetic domain, an affect’s being fitting is a permissive matter, not an obligatory one. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Even if this did follow, it would not face a challenge from *may implies can*, since that principle is false (see Whiting 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For criticism, see (King 2014). For defence, see (Streumer 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For relevant discussion, see (Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In relation to reasons for acting, as opposed to feeling, Lopes points out that a decisive aesthetic reason need not be decisive all-things-considered (2018: 39-40). I return to this point later. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Compare Harman’s (1986: 12) claim that belief is subject to a norm of clutter avoidance. I set aside the idea that *moral* considerations might provide reasons against matching attitudes as insufficiently general. For some contributions to the vast literature on the relationship between the moral and aesthetic domains, see (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, Eaton 2012, Gaut 2007, Harold 2011, Paris 2019, Song 2018, Stear 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For discussion of the distinction, though not always in these terms, see (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, Hieronymi 2005, Lord and Sylvan 2019, Olson 2004, Parfit 2001, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004, Schroeder 2012, Sharadin 2015, Way 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For challenges to this constraint, see (Markovits 2011, Schroeder 2007: 165-166). For defence, see (Paakkunainen 2018, Way and Whiting 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Perhaps the costs associated with bringing about the attitude are non-negligible. In that case, they might be reasons of non-negligible weight against performing the (mental or non-mental) actions that result in the relevant feeling. It does not follow that they are reasons against the attitude itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, for example, (Gibbons 2013, Kiesewetter 2017, Lord 2015, Markovits 2010, Raz 2011, Setiya 2014). Some allow that facts that do not meet the epistemic constraint provide reasons but claim that they only bear on what a person ought to do when they meet that constraint. For present purposes, this difference does not make a difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For critical discussion, see (Graham 2010, Littlejohn 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The subject might not be in a position to know that *all* the aesthetically relevant features obtain, but that is not what the epistemic constraint requires. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This echoes a move made in a similar debate in epistemology. Some defend the view that there are positive epistemic obligations conditional on considering a proposition (see Wedgwood 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Compare: ‘There seems to be […] rational pressure to ensure the continuance of […] enabling conditions (McGonigal 2017: 46n17). Also: ‘If a consideration is a reason for a person to perform an action, this very same consideration is also a reason for this person not to make it impossible for him- or herself to perform this action’ (Streumer 2018: 244). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Actions here include (voluntary) mental actions, such as imagining, considering, and reflecting. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Some aesthetic features are disvalues. I set this aside for ease of presentation. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. At least *in vacuo*. Compare fn11. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This is not intended as a (full or partial) analysis of what it is to be a reason for acting, demanding or otherwise (compare Maguire 2016). Rather, it is intended as a first-order claim. Relatedly, I do not assume that all reasons for action are value-based. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In turn, Lopes suggests that a person aesthetically ought to act just in case it would be an aesthetic achievement for some member of the relevant aesthetic practice to do so (2018: 119). I set aside this part of the story here. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Another point of difference with Lopes is that he takes reasons to be reasons for *aesthetic acts*, understood as actions based on aesthetic evaluations, that is, judgements (and other representations) of aesthetic value (2018: 40). So, aesthetic reasons are second-order in Raz’s (1990) sense: reasons to act with certain motivations. That is not built into the views I advance here. For critical discussion, see (Whiting 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. That is not to say, of course, that browbeating is called for (see Lopes 2018: 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. If there are aesthetic obligations or duties, one might wonder if there is such a thing as aesthetic supererogation, actions that go beyond the call of aesthetic duty. For discussion, see (Archer and Ware 2017, also McElwee 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Thanks to an audience at Southampton for feedback on this material, to Jonathan Way and anonymous referees for written comments on earlier versions, and to Alex King for discussion of the issues it concerns. Thanks of a different sort to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding in support of this research (AH/S006338/1). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)