

The unity of our aesthetic life

A crazy suggestion

Vítor Guerreiro

Institute of Philosophy, University of Porto

Unity of what?

First of all, a few words of clarification. At least two issues might come to mind when one thinks of “the unity” of some such thing as our “aesthetic life”: on the one hand, the issue of how aesthetics fits into our lives as a whole, what relations it has with other important aspects of our lives, in sum, the unity of aesthetics *and* life. Another way to say this is to ask: in what ways is our “aesthetic life” connected with our “life” under different aspects, for instance, how is one’s aesthetic life connected with one’s moral life? And why such emphasis on the notion of a *life*? Why not simply ask about the connections between aesthetics and morals, or whatever? Can we delimit, in our lives, that part which is “aesthetic” and that which is not? On the other hand, there is the unity of “the aesthetic” itself, that is, the issue of whether there is a unified class of phenomena, concepts, experiences, etc., that we refer to when we employ the notion of “aesthetic”, which is to say: is “the aesthetic” a cohesive notion? Either of these issues is quite a challenge by itself! So, we better draw a few lines if we don’t want to be completely at loss.

Aesthetics and ethics

Allow me to start with a reference from “pop culture”. There is this particular moment in the TV series *Hannibal* (season 3, episode 1) that has lingered in my mind since I’ve seen it. This is the moment when Bedelia says to Hannibal “You have no longer ethical concerns, Hannibal. You have aesthetic ones”, to which he replies, “Ethics beco-

me aesthetics". Several puzzling ideas are evoked by this exchange: is it possible for a rational being (however much of a sociopath) to have aesthetic concerns while totally devoid of ethical ones? What does it mean for ethics to become aesthetics? Is he agreeing with her statement? Is he qualifying it in some way? Should one read "becomes" as in "it gives way to", or does it refer to a change in our beliefs, as in our realizing that some connection between ethics and aesthetics was there all along?

Now, I am sure not much thought was put into that combination of words (and why should it?) beyond the fact that it makes for a good-sounding sequence; not unlike one might say of Keats' poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn*: that it sounds really great (and equally mysterious) to end with "beauty is truth, truth beauty..." even though it is, as Nick Zangwill pointed out, a counter-example to itself, namely, a beautiful false statement – not to imply that Keats didn't put much thought into it, of course. Likewise, "ethics become aesthetics" could be just that: not a counter-example to itself, but a false statement that sounds good.

However, it also captured my attention the fact that the character Hannibal followed a kind of code in selecting at least some of his victims: these tend to be *rude* individuals or people who end up triggering his murderous dispositions by performing some kind of unsavoury deed or who display unpleasant traits of character. And this in turn is interesting: besides satisfying his ritualistic need for the consumption of human flesh, Hannibal seems moved by a concern to diminish the amount of rudeness in the world, on the one hand, much in the manner that a writer, musician or painter may be concerned with increasing the amount of aesthetic goodness in the world, by removing undesired aesthetic effects from a line of text, a sequence of music or a pictorial arrangement so that his concern seems eminently aesthetic, but, on the other hand, the target of his aesthetic judgement is... a moral quality or a set of morally relevant qualities. And here, so it seems, is an example of ethics becoming aesthetics! Hannibal as a moral aesthete! The statement doesn't seem so outlandish if there is a firm connection between moral qualities and aesthetic ones, just as there is such a connection between colours, shapes and timbres and aesthetic qualities of pictures or pieces of music. But what could that connection be?

One suggestion that I find fruitful was made by Roger Scruton in Chapter 16 of his *Art and Imagination* and Chapter 12 of his *Aesthetics of Music*. Specifically, Scruton's position is that there is a continui-

ty between the moral and the aesthetic in that complex affair which is the exercise of taste as a “systematic posture in the life of the rational being”¹, as opposed to mere “refined choosiness”² or “arbitrary preference”³. And it is in this notion of the exercise of taste as a systematic posture in *life* that the core idea of this paper finds its expression. The idea is that both aesthetic and moral valuation are properly mediated by the concept of *a life* (so both must be seen as concomitant parts of the same process), and that we fail to grasp the nature and boundaries of aesthetic valuation unless we see it in its appropriate context, as an ingredient of *a life being lived in a certain way* (an idea I take from Jerrold Levinson, as explained further ahead). How this is so is what I expect to have been made clearer at the end. However, it is important to note that Scruton’s point is not that aesthetic valuation is moral valuation in disguise; the point is rather that normative attitudes form a mutually sustaining web. Nor does the idea of a continuity between the aesthetic and moral point of view imply that moral and aesthetic valuation cannot diverge, that “aesthetically discriminating moral brutes and aesthetically blind moral saints”⁴ are conceptually impossible. But let us put such details aside for now.

“Conventional wisdom” in aesthetics and the role of the non-perceptual

In carrying out the aforementioned task, I must draw attention to a book that deals with these issues in a quite unconventional manner, or, perhaps more accurately, sets forth insights and draws conclusions that go against the grain of what I shall call “conventional wisdom” in aesthetics. This book is *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, by Colin McGinn (2003). There are many interesting aspects to this book, but I want to emphasize only three of them: 1) the Aesthetic Theory of Virtue (ATV), 2) Nabokov’s Formula, and 3) Pan-aestheticism.

Before explaining each of these items, a sketch of what I am calling “conventional wisdom” in aesthetics is in order.

a) Only things that can be perceived by the senses are objects of aesthetic judgement.

1. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 386.

2. Scruton, *The Aesthetics...*, 386.

3. Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination, A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 247.

4. Nick Zangwill, *Music and Aesthetic Reality: Formalism and the Limits of Description* (New York / London: Routledge, 2015), 165.

b) Deployment of aesthetic predicates to describe the non-perceptual is not a genuinely aesthetic use of language.

c) Aesthetic experience, if there is such a thing, is detached from the flow of ordinary experience and judgements expressing such experiences take a restricted domain of objects as their “targets”, namely, works of art, and, occasionally, natural objects.

This is more or less an inherited picture of what our “aesthetic life” looks like. What I shall do now is try to show how those three elements I highlighted from McGinn’s book allow us to draw a very different picture of our “aesthetic life”.

Very briefly, the ATV is an attempt at reviving the idea of “beauty of soul” – more precisely, the idea that non-perceptual things like thoughts, traits of character and even persons or minds – “souls” – are as much objects of aesthetic predication as natural landscapes and paintings and pieces of music; Nabokov’s formula is the idea that beauty puts us in contact with certain ideals, specifically, with the ideal of a world where “art is the norm” and thus that to experience some particular object or event aesthetically involves more than just a causal route from perception to pleasure or displeasure; and, finally, pan-aestheticism, in McGinn’s own words, tells us that

There is a tendency for people to think of the aesthetic in much too narrow terms, as if it included only what is to be found in museums and art galleries, along with natural landscapes. But the aesthetic permeates almost every experience a human being has, and at many levels. We are aesthetic beings through and through; we apprehend the world through aesthetic eyes. Not only are other people perceived aesthetically, so are animals of other species. Not only are buildings and sculptures aesthetic objects, so are kitchen knives and screwdrivers and stereo systems. Speech acts have aesthetic properties. Ideas and thoughts do too. It is hard to name anything that lacks an aesthetic dimension, positive or negative.⁵

Let us start with pan-aestheticism, which is, in a way, connected with the first item of the three. Now, what McGinn says may be all well and good, but how does it actually work?

This is a very contentious issue, since there is not a single uniquely plausible account of aesthetic experience, and the very notion of aesthetic experience has famously been subjected to sceptic criticism.

5. Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 121.

My intention is merely to give an example of what an account compatible with pan-aestheticism would look like. But before I do that, a few remarks on the notion of “aesthetic property”. One way to characterize aesthetic experience would be as experience *of* aesthetic qualities of things. But what is it for something to have an “aesthetic property” or “quality”? Consider the remark: “Imagine this butterfly exactly as it is, but ugly instead of beautiful” (taken from Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*)⁶. This remark hits upon the fact that while we can perfectly well imagine the butterfly being red instead of blue and most likely still beautiful (assuming we experience it as beautiful to start with), we cannot even start to conceive how it could change its aesthetic qualities without any change in its other properties (colour, shape, texture, etc.) Furthermore, we can experience each of its non-aesthetic features in isolation from each other – the blue apart from its shape, its shape apart from its texture, etc. But there is something oxymoronic in the idea of perceiving its beauty in isolation from its other features. And one possible explanation for this is that, strictly speaking, we don’t *perceive* beauty at all, like we perceive the wing-shape and its pattern of black and blue (assume the butterfly in question is a specimen of *papilio zalmoxis*), though we certainly *experience* beauty in some way, and an important element of that experience is the *pleasure* or *delight* we feel in experiencing the characteristics of the object.

Some aestheticians have characterized this aspect of aesthetic experience in terms of supervenience between properties: aesthetic properties supervene on non-aesthetic “base” properties, on which they depend, and two things cannot differ aesthetically without also differing non-aesthetically (a view that ultimately traces back to Sibley (1959), though he speaks there of “concepts”, not “properties” and does not use the term “supervenience”⁷). With this way of framing the relation between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, we could diagrammatically represent the contrast between the aesthetic formalist and the aesthetic anti-formalist in terms of what kinds of properties can be taken as non-aesthetic “base” properties giving rise to aesthetic properties. The formalist will typically include perceptual properties only, while the anti-formalist will also include non-perceptual ones, such as, for instance, features things have in virtue of their context or their history of production, representational properties, and such.

6. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*. Trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 199, 36e.

7. For a more recent view of the cohesion of the aesthetic in terms of supervenience, see Eddy Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997) and Nick Zangwill, «The Concept of the Aesthetic», *European Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, 1 (1998): 78-93.

Although a clear-cut distinction between a formalist and an anti-formalist approach is a contentious issue (partly because of the difficulty of discerning “form” and “content”; partly because there are as many stripes of formalism as there are ways of understanding “form”), we can say that formalism tends to focus on what can be immediately perceived on a given work, in detriment of its farther-reaching ties with the world, with life at large, placing “form” within this secluded realm and seeing its boundaries as marking out the aesthetic itself. It was summed up by Clive Bell in these oft-quoted words from his “The Aesthetic Hypothesis”: “The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions”⁸.

Formalism notwithstanding, one putative example of the history of production clearly determining the aesthetic quality of the end product is to be found in the world of folk songs. *Shoals of Herring* was composed by Ewan MacColl for a 1960 BBC documentary called *Singing the Fishing*, about the herring fishing fleets of East Anglia and Northeast Scotland. One of the aesthetically relevant features of that song is that MacColl didn’t actually *wrote* its text (according to the story of the song told by Liam Clancy, one of the song’s many well-known interpreters) but rather put together the words of fishermen themselves, out of the many tapes of conversation with fishermen and their families, that were recorded for the documentary. (“*Oh, we left the home grounds in the month of June, and to Canny Shields we soon were bearin’, with a hundred cran of the silver darlings, that we’d taken from the shoals of herring...*”) From that mesh of words and testimonies, MacColl *assembled* the text of the ballad, the paradigm folk song to fit Oscar Isaac’s description in the Coen brother’s movie *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013): “If it was never new and it never gets old, then it’s a folk song” – and part of this is achieved by its being the result of such a peculiar “production process”. Though a formalist, out of unwavering loyalty for the “conventional wisdom” picture of aesthetics, might want to argue that these facts about provenance do not bear on the aesthetic qualities of the song, I find that impossibly counterintuitive.

8. Clive Bell, «The Aesthetic Hypothesis», in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by C. Harrison and P. Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1992), 113-116.



Figure 1: João Serra, *View of Apatity* (Murmansk Oblast, Russia), *The North as Place*.

To illustrate the difference between the formalist and anti-formalist approaches more fully, I invite the reader to look at the photograph in Fig. 1. It is an aerial view of urban landscape in Apatity, a town in Murmansk Oblast, Russia. It was taken by a photographer friend of mine, for the duration of a project called *The North as Place*. Now, without any further information, we can approach the photograph by noting how the central mass of grey buildings functions as a background to that open “wound” of the torn red brick buildings in the front. We could develop such an approach in similar terms, reaching for metaphors and allusions with which to stress and bring forward the aesthetic merits of the image. But consider now the following extra-pictorial information: the torn red brick buildings date from the Stalinist era and have remained a part of the urban landscape despite previous (failed) attempts at demolition (a rather expensive process); the central “smudge” of grey buildings are from the Khrushchov era; to the right we have a few taller buildings (and of lesser quality) dating from the Brezhnev era; and finally, to the left, hardly visible on the left centre edge of the picture, one can spot a tiny yellow supermarket of the Putin era. Now, I ask the reader: does the image look *aesthetically different*

to you, given that information? Why? As far as I'm concerned, it is as impossibly counterintuitive to claim that the information makes no aesthetic difference as it is to claim that it makes no difference for the song in our previous example to have been assembled from the words of fishermen. Maybe even more so. There is no doubting that the image *looks* different to one who knows the relevant information. The photograph as an achievement, and in fact, as an artistic object, looks different depending on what approach we take towards the role played by the extra-pictorial information. There is even an important sense in which the intentions of the artist, which are a non-perceptual element of the situation, might bear on the aesthetic quality of the picture. That the audience is presented with this layered glimpse of soviet history, condensed in this abstracted moment from the life of the present, by an intentional, directed action of the artist, seems to make it a better *aesthetic achievement* than it being the pure outcome of chance (the necessity of the artist being aware of it *at the moment of creation* (in this case, at the moment the photograph is taken), of course, can be the subject of dispute. But whatever our stance on these two examples, they allow us to see the difference between a "conventional wisdom" approach to aesthetics, that I am here associating with formalism, and a view of aesthetics that widens the scope of what phenomena or aspects of things count as aesthetic or contribute to their aesthetic quality.

These were two simple examples of how the non-perceptual may bear on the aesthetic qualities of an object, when we drop what I have been calling the "conventional wisdom" view of the aesthetic domain. Both are less "radical" examples than what McGinn proposes, but they can all be understood to lie on the same *continuum*: the two examples invite us to enlarge the determination base of aesthetic qualities so as to include non-perceptual features, so that perceptual features in conjunction with non-perceptual ones may be aesthetically relevant. One can accept this while maintaining that perceptual features are always necessary for something to have aesthetic qualities, and that non-perceptual features may or may not be relevant, depending on their connection with perceptual features.

But how serious (and how radically) is pan-aestheticism to be taken? In the previous examples, the changes introduced don't take place at the "upper level" of aesthetic properties – those remain the same, nothing changes there – but at the "ground level", in terms of what non-aesthetic features of things will fix their aesthetic qualities, and what kinds of things can be the bearers of aesthetic qualities. The photograph may be more "dramatic" or "ironic" or whatever, for instance, in virtue of the non-pictorial (non-perceptual) information, but this represents no change in the concept of "dramatism" or "irony";

rather it is a widening of scope in the things we count towards the picture's "dramatism" or "irony" – or any other of its aesthetic qualities or cluster of aesthetic qualities. In other words, nothing in the concept of beauty or other aesthetic qualities is changed by our applying it to the non-perceptual in some combination with the perceptual.

What clashes with conventional wisdom and may strike one as bizarre in this is the suggestion of ideas, thoughts and minds (or "souls") figuring as bearers of aesthetic properties, because this is the idea of something having aesthetic qualities without having any perceptual qualities. How strikingly evocative of that same strangeness of imagining the butterfly's beauty in the absence of its other features! And this strangeness partly explains the reluctance of attributing aesthetic features to the non-perceptual. One may ask, accordingly, what could "beauty of soul" possibly mean, if it means anything at all. But in asking this one is overlooking the fact that neither do we have a clear idea of what "the butterfly is beautiful" exactly means, apart from the vivid phenomenological link between experience of the butterfly's perceptual properties and the delight we feel in experiencing them. So, on what grounds exactly do we exclude the idea of moral beauty (or moral ugliness) from the realm of aesthetics? People express their character and personality in actions, gestures, utterances, demeanour, and these can hardly be described as things devoid of features that can be appreciated aesthetically. That being so, on what grounds are moral qualities, embodied in concrete gestures excluded from playing a role in aesthetic appreciation? The element of pleasure and displeasure in such qualities as embodied in concrete gestures seems as phenomenologically vivid as the pleasure we may feel in beholding the perceptual qualities of the butterfly. What precludes our concern with the rudeness of gesture from being as thoroughly aesthetic as a concern with discord, or words and musical notes that seem "out of place"?

One can experience this effect most clearly, I believe, with certain specific examples in artworks, but only because they bring into focus something that is commonly experienced in everyday life. Consider the sequence in the movie by Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo Story* (1953), when, during a meal following their mother's funeral, the eldest sister in the family, Shige, repeatedly asks about clothes she could take for herself as keepsakes, moving to this topic immediately after expressing concern over her father's solitude. I like to observe this sequence under McGinn's metaphor of "moral chords", as somehow a musical sequence, in which some of the notes sound "out of tune", due to the sense of moral discord they give rise to, a sense of ugliness that cannot be reduced to anything strictly perceptual about the characters and their setting. (The situation is complicated by the fact that the ugliness resi-

des not in the film sequence, but in what it represents, though the film represents beautifully the ugliness that momentarily is brought to our awareness; and this reinforces the idea that beauty is more complex than a matter of pleasurable sensations following perceptual stimuli.) The effect is at once ethic and aesthetic, rather than that of a situation with certain moral properties and certain aesthetic properties, wholly unrelated to each other. Of course, this could be the onset of an endless “war of intuitions”, in which I will be represented by the “other side” as merely begging the question against the “aesthetic autonomist”. And I see no easy way to break the circle, since the deadlock pretty much depends on the notion of the aesthetic one starts with. So, what we must do, as I see it, is to choose that notion which seems to us more enlightening or explanatory... But even here there is no guarantee that we won’t fall back into a circle of “intuitions”. Nonetheless, examples like this sequence of “wrong moral notes” generating a kind of musical discord help us make more vivid the key idea that aesthetics is not merely a question of reacting with pleasure or displeasure to perceptual stimuli, but rather lies in the continuous exercise of “taste” as a faculty not akin to mere sense perception or the ability to feel pleasure and displeasure, but something we *do* and *undergo* as subjects of a *life* and that cannot be done nor undergone by any being that is not, in like manner, the subject of a life. What does this mean, however? Surely not the trivial notion that one must be alive in order to experience things aesthetically, since being alive is a condition of experiencing things *tout court*.

The aesthetic: lived rather than simply perceived

The relevant notion of *life* to be used here is that of being an individual with a *history*, a history that is as much his or her own as it is rooted in the common history of many individuals, such that each individual history shares certain “structural” properties: we all “develop”, go through childhood, become adults, grow old; we share a sense of origin and of our own finitude; we cooperate in maintaining practices, languages, cultures, a sense of shared experience through time – which doesn’t mean that much of that shared experience isn’t adversarial in nature: it surely is. Still, what I wish to emphasize is that *living one’s life* is something that unavoidably involves joint action, shared goals, cooperation, and not just a sequence of “private” experiences. A life involves experiences, actions, facts, many of which go way beyond the boundaries of one’s own “private” experience. A life is much more than a mere sequence of subjective experiences that a living organism has: it is something that plays a certain role in the lives of others (who-

se lives play a role in our own) and all jointly play a role in some larger process, far more complex than the life of a single individual. Also, one crucial element in our “aesthetic life” is that we constantly *seek agreement* in aesthetic matters (we have *normative expectations* regarding the aesthetic), and that such agreement *matters* to us at least as much as any pleasurable feeling we might draw from experiencing this or that: “... we speak of what is appropriate only where there exists some established practice (...) with its body of generalities and rules”⁹.

However, to experience things aesthetically is something that always occurs in *individual conscience*, no matter how much that conscience must be buttressed by forms of joint action and shared experience and no matter how crucially important our normative expectations (expectations towards collective agreement) in aesthetic matters are. Aesthetic judgement or experience is something that each one of us both *does* and *undergoes* in the same ineluctably “solitary” way that one must experience both pleasure and pain and any other sensations. Using Nick Zangwill’s words, “We can listen to music together in the sense of going to a concert together, just as we can eat together when we sit down to a meal with each other. This is joint action. But we cannot listen to music together any more than we can taste food together”¹⁰.

It is thus as subjects of *a* life, a particular life, namely *one’s own* life (though also as examples of the *kind* of beings that are subjects of lives, and thus similar in many fundamental ways), that things appear to us endowed with aesthetic features. This requires us to abandon the idea of modelling “aesthetic properties” in terms of other properties such as the roundness and whiteness of this coffee cup in front of me. As one grows old and accumulates experiences and knowledge, one is able to make many different *associations* between the colour white and a vast array of other things – whiteness acquires a wider range of *symbolic properties* for us, and this may be a relevant ingredient of aesthetic experiences. But our ability to experience the cup as white and round is pretty much the same from the moment we become able to discern objects visually. No matter how much subtler and more nuanced my symbolic associations with whiteness become, my ability to see the cup as white is no different than it was twenty years ago, or since I became able to discern colours. Of course, visual acuity varies with time and circumstances, but this is irrelevant to the experience of whiteness itself – more or less blurred, the experience of the cup as white is essentially the same. By contrast, I know as a fact that my ability to experience things aesthetically is not the same, in this sense, that it was twenty years ago. Sure, my tastes in music and such things did

9. Scruton, *Art...*, 247.

10. Zangwill, *Music...*, 155.

not change radically (they hardly changed at all, despite the fact that I know more of the “genres” that attract me); however, there are many things that I am able to *see aesthetically* that I wasn’t before. This is an experience with which people are most obviously acquainted with in the case of literature: the experience of reading the same novel again with an interval of several years. One example could be that of fully appreciating the irony of a certain passage. Likewise, appreciating the elegance or graciousness of a gesture requires more than visual acuity, or being endowed with the distinguishing features of the “standard observer” in “standard conditions of observation”. The aesthetic faculty, in a way, grows with us, although developing aesthetic sensitivity is not strictly a matter of psychological “maturity”. Aesthetic blindness can perfectly well coexist with psychological maturity: a “fully developed” adult with perfect visual acuity may yet fail to notice how certain colours and shapes fail to “go together”, resulting in an imbalance, for instance. This is what made the gustatory metaphor of “taste” and a sustained exercise of taste over time (the discernment of what “goes together”) so compelling, from Burke and Hume to Sibley and our own times. And yet, the elegance and irony of a gesture must differ so much from the bitterness of an ale or the dryness of Port wine as they differ from the whiteness of the coffee cup, in the same measure that they resemble the bitterness of an expression. The point of the metaphor lies in the fact that the enjoyable qualities of a good meal are, to an extent, the result of a previous history of such experiences.

Anyway, the point here is to try and get the reader to see the inadequacy of modelling “aesthetic properties” on other “metaphysically respectable” properties by appealing to notions of “standard conditions of observation” and “supervenience” or “co-variation” between properties, as if the mere description of the aesthetic realm under those concepts was *the* expedient that finally confers upon aesthetics its so desired epistemic probity. Under this model, elegance is “out there” in the world, emerging from certain combinations of non-aesthetic properties and accessible to the “standard observer” in “standard conditions of observation”. To see things aesthetically, though, is nothing like seeing the cup as a round white object of a certain volume... in standard conditions of observation. The elegance (or other aesthetic features) of a tea cup or a building, for instance, is a far cloudier matter that involves an active exercise of the imagination, by beings who, like ourselves, are not only capable of forming beliefs about their environment, but also *desires* regarding it and what it contains. Furthermore, we also interpret the appearance of things as impacting our desires in certain ways¹¹. Thus, the *sublime* in some earthly or cosmic event, a

11. The importance I give *desire* here pretty much echoes what Eddy Zemach says in

natural catastrophe or the starry sky, does not issue from some relation of co-variation between properties “out there” – the sublimity is wholly a feature of *our* relation with the world and how it impacts our desires; namely: what defies *our* normal cognitive abilities, our capacities of representation, our normal intelligence, the temporal and physical boundaries of our existence, our lives. Something is sublime in part because of the devastating effect it could have on our desires – desire to know, to overcome an obstacle, to persist in existence, etc. The starry sky is sublime partly because of how small *we* are in comparison and given the limits of our understanding; the Everest is sublime because of its dimensions relative to us. But it is not a sheer matter of relative dimensions; it is crucially a matter of the *imagination*. The sublimity of Mount Everest does not reside merely in the brute fact that its dimensions greatly surpass that of a human being; it crucially depends on how it engages our imagination, and there are many aspects to that engagement: how climbing it is a feat of human ingenuity, physical endurance and probably madness; how it makes us think of the forces of nature in relation to us generally; and a host of such “imaginative aspects”. A feature such as sublimity could not be in starker contrast to such properties as the whiteness of the coffee cup, whose understanding must include some reference to the structure of our perceptive organs but in no way requires the engagement of the imagination that seeing something as sublime, as elegant or as *wabi-sabi* (or whatever aesthetic feature you can think of) requires, for to interpret the appearance of things in their relation to our desires *is* a feat of the imagination, no matter how spontaneous or “unprimed” it may be¹².

Aesthetic Platonism without Plato: The “beautiful life” as Idea of Beauty

The suggestion I have been making takes inspiration from a paper by Jerrold Levinson (2006) titled “Intrinsic Value and the Notion of a Life”, in which the author deals with the issue of what can be the object of “sustainable judgements of intrinsic value”¹³. In this paper,

Real Beauty (1997) – see the whole of Chapter 5, “The ontology of aesthetic properties” –, minus the “realist ontology” he goes on to offer, making generous use of the notion of supervenience.

12. For a critical view on attempts to base “aesthetic realism” on the notion of supervenience, including Zemach’s, to the effect that appeals to supervenience, as they stand, can be set aside for Wittgensteinian aspect perception, see Benjamin Tilghman, *Reflections on Aesthetic Judgement and Other Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

13. Jerrold Levinson, «Intrinsic Value and the Notion of a Life», in *Contemplating*

Levinson proposes that a certain kind of complex object is the only one susceptible of being the bearer of intrinsic value: *lives-being-certain-ways*. Not the abstract notion of life as such, the idea that life in itself has intrinsic value, but that concrete ways that a richly sentient life unfolds are the only *bona fide* candidates to be bearers of intrinsic value. Levinson divides accounts of intrinsic value into two varieties: object-based accounts and experience-based accounts (*ibidem*), that is, accounts that ascribe intrinsic value to external objects and accounts that ascribe intrinsic value to subjective experiences. His proposal is that due to the impossibility of preserving the value of a thing or experience while detaching it from the context that gives rise to such value, *lives-being-certain-ways* are the only kind of complex, encompassing entities that can really have intrinsic value, because they encompass both objects and experiences, and a robust link to reality that seems to be relevant in the assessment of an experience's value. Roughly, it is the idea that experiences are episodes in a life, and two lives made up of similar experiential episodes may nonetheless determine a difference of value between such experiences, so that, for instance, two samples of the same kind of pleasure may have widely differing values when inserted in the context of actual lives being certain ways. One corollary of this is that not even beauty or the experience of beauty turn out to have intrinsic value, except when seen in the context of a life being a certain way. The value of beauty is undetachable from the notion of a life which is enriched by the presence of beauty in specific circumstances. There is also a potentially useful analogy here between object-based accounts and experience-based accounts of intrinsic value being subsumed in the notion of a life being a certain way, and accounts of aesthetic value that focus either on properties of objects in the world or on properties of subjective experiences: it suggests that both suffer from the same one-sidedness that supposedly plague accounts of intrinsic value. The idea is that the aesthetic will only emerge when certain properties of both objects and experiences are *integrated* into something with a wider purpose.

One way, perhaps, of making these ideas somewhat less ethereal is perhaps to think in terms of the mechanism described by Scruton in his paper "In Search of the Aesthetic" (2007), which we can characterize as the mechanism through which "pan-aestheticism" actually works in our lives. In that paper, Scruton describes what he calls a process of eliminating redundancies, those rational choices that are left when all practical and utilitarian decisions have been made. As an illustration of this process, he makes use of the Wittgensteinian example of a carpenter deciding on how to make a door frame so that it will "fit" the

Art: Essays in Aesthetics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 400.

environment, associating “door-shapes with specific forms of social life, with ways of entering and leaving a room, with styles of dress and behavior”¹⁴. This is an instance of the human need to organize our environment so that appearances of things around us are invested with meaning, imprinting our “mark on the world”, so to speak. The practice of art can thus be seen as an extension of this all-pervasive concern in “everyday aesthetic matters”. The purpose of “eliminating redundancies” is that of fitting the appearances in our environments into *styles*, that invest such appearances with meaning, in a myriad subtle ways. And what I’m proposing here is that such process can perhaps be fruitfully seen as a microcosm version of the more basic process of fitting aspects of our lives into meaningful patterns that make up a style, a meaningful way for a life to be, and that would be a picture that captures the unity or continuity between both dimensions of our acts of valuation: ethical and aesthetical.

Whether he is right or wrong about the nature of intrinsic value, one aspect that Levinson’s paper leaves open is that of what the specific ways a life is that make it intrinsically valuable are (there is no presumption of a *single* way a life can be that makes it so, lest we find ourselves staunchly committed to the aesthetics of socialist realism). And the suggestion I’m going to make now will probably have as a consequence that McGinn’s ATV will seem, by contrast, much more plausible, in light of the preposterousness of my own suggestion. And that suggestion is a further widening of scope of the things that may figure as bearers of aesthetic qualities and targets of aesthetic judgement. I propose that *lives-being-certain-ways* are, in their turn, the bearers of aesthetic qualities, and that the ways a life can be that make it intrinsically valuable are those ways that amount to... a *beautiful life*. And now that we have crossed entirely into the realm of craziness, I can close by suggesting a possible way of making all this slightly more intelligible (or wildly crazier) by connecting it with the second item in the list of features I pointed out from McGinn’s book: Nabokov’s formula.

The idea that specific instances of beauty put us in contact with certain ideals, namely, ideals of a world where art is the norm¹⁵ can be translated into the notion that the ideal of a *beautiful life* (the kind of thing that must, of necessity, include moral beauty) implicitly guides or informs our aesthetic experience, so that our “aesthetic endeavours”, in and outside of the restricted domain of art, can be seen as a fulfilment of Beardsley’s suggestion that “in creating works of art we humanize the earth as we can in no other way, warming it for ourselves and

14. Roger Scruton, «In Search of the Aesthetic», *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 47, 3 (2007): 244.

15. See McGinn, *Ethics...*, 110.

making it a place where we belong”¹⁶, which in turn connects with Scruton’s remarks on aesthetic interest being essentially tied with the endeavour of making for ourselves a home, a place in the world where we belong. In other words, a beautiful object is more than an occasion for pleasure in perceptual features. The unity of a beautiful object, the cohesion of its aesthetic features, is, in this suggestion, also as if an intimation the unity of a beautiful life, which is, among other things, the idea of a harmonious combination of moral qualities, or in McGinn’s musical metaphor, a harmonious blend of “ethical chords”¹⁷. We can find roughly the same idea, though in a marxist framework, in Herbert Marcuse (1978): his critique of “orthodox” marxist aesthetics, by which he places “the political potential of art in art itself, in the aesthetic form as such”¹⁸; this “aesthetic form”, a “dimension of truth, protest and promise”¹⁹, as «subversive of perception and understanding, an indictment of the established reality, the appearance of the image of liberation»²⁰; in other words: “aesthetic form” as, once again, that which puts us in contact with certain ideals; an “invocation of the beautiful image (*schöner Schein*) of liberation”²¹; and the same basic idea could undoubtedly be given many more different, more or less ideologically inflected versions.

Of course, this idea is not without its challenges. Consider the futurist’s “aestheticization” of war (in Benjamin’s phrase), and their adherence, however troubled and uneven, to fascist politics. When Paul Nash painted *We are Making a New World*, in 1918, a painting which gives us a bleak, desolating image of the outcome of the first world war, an indictment of senseless destruction, did he have the same understanding of “beauty” that Marinetti had while penning the words of the “Manifesto for the Colonial War in Ethiopia”, quoted in the epilogue of “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction”²²? If futurist works put us in contact with any ideals, these do not seem remotely to accord with anything Beardsley or McGinn have described;

16. Monroe Beardsley, «Art and Its Cultural Context, in *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*. Ed. by M. Wreen and D. Callen, 352-370 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 370.

17. McGinn, *Ethics...*, 102.

18. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Trans. by H Marcuse and E. Sherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), ix.

19. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic...*, xii.

20. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic...*, xi.

21. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic...*, 6.

22. See Walter Benjamin, «The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction», in *Aesthetics: a Comprehensive Anthology*. Ed. by S. Cahn and A. Meskin, (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 339.

surely not with the words by Nabokov whence McGinn derived the eponymous “formula”: “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm”²³. Whatever notion of a life-being-a-certain-way might have given the futurists a sense of beauty in “spirals of smoke from burning villages”, in a state of permanent conflict, aggression, and acceleration, to experience more beauty in the roar of an engine than in a winged *nike* of classical antiquity, it surely has little to do with tenderness and kindness.

And with this we are curiously lead back to the original problem: that of aesthetic objectivity, how to ground our normative aspirations concerning aesthetic judgement, our continual striving towards agreement. It seems that to answer the questions of the previous paragraph we must ask this one: what is *wrong* about those ways a life can be from whose viewpoint the aesthetics of futurism looks and sounds not only a “live option” (in James’ sense), but also appealing and compelling? What is *right* about a way a life can be from whose viewpoint one is put in a position to see it as Nash saw it? So, quite appropriately, as one may see, our aesthetic concerns bring us back full circle to our moral concerns. Both “form part of a continuum of normative opinions which mutually sustain one another”²⁴. We experience things aesthetically as moral beings, and make moral valuations as aesthetic beings. Like fishes becoming birds becoming fishes, in an M. C. Escher print, “ethics and aesthetics are one”.

As if concluding... Though not really

After having made all these observations and “crazy suggestions”, I must also say that their full significance is still, for me, something that is undergoing a process of “being fitted into a meaningful pattern”. I cannot pretend to have a full grasp of the intuitions I have basically hoarded here, and yet neither can I avoid the feeling that they pull us in a fruitful direction... The right direction? Towards... What? I don’t quite know yet. Most importantly, I have literally run out of time to say anything else... For now.

23. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. Ed. by Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 314.

24. Scruton, *Art...*, 247.

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