

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aesthetic value, objectivity, and the fabric of the world

JOHN MCDOWELL

I

Aesthetic experience typically presents itself, at least in part, as a confrontation with value: an awareness of value as something residing in an object and available to be encountered. It thus invites the thought that value is, as J. L. Mackie puts it in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*,¹ ‘part of the fabric of the world’ (p. 15). Mackie does not dispute, but indeed insists on, this phenomenological claim. But he contends that the appearance is illusory: value is not found in the world, but projected into it, a mere reflection of subjective responses.

Mackie’s concern is primarily with ethical value, but he claims that ‘clearly much the same considerations apply to aesthetic and to moral values’ (p. 15). In this paper I want to consider the plausibility of Mackie’s thesis for the case of aesthetic value in particular.

The issue I mean to raise is not one about the significance of some putative range of peculiarly aesthetic, or perhaps more generally evaluative, vocabulary. It may well be true that a helpful critic rarely, if ever, makes an outright attempt to characterize the value which, in experiencing the works he discusses as they should be experienced, one should find in them (as the phenomenology of the experience tempts us to say). In that case explicitly evaluative terms are less than centrally important in the vocabulary of criticism. But this need not suggest that Mackie’s thesis is not fundamental to aesthetics; for it remains plausible that the point of the critic’s activity is to help his audience towards a proper experience of any work he discusses (an experience whose content he need not try to formulate explicitly), and thus that the critic’s aim is, by a careful directing or focusing of the audience’s attention to the work, to enable the audience to find for himself the value there is in it (still speaking as the phenomenology invites). The question Mackie raises – whether this is genuinely a matter of *finding* – has an interest for philosophical aesthetics that is quite independent of the mildly comical idea that the subject-matter

¹ Harmondsworth, 1977.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN MCDOWELL

of aesthetics is a set of judgements in which objects are explicitly appraised, ranked, or evaluated.

II

How should we interpret what our aesthetic experience purports, as it were, to tell us, when it represents value as part of the fabric of the world? What is the content of the appearance?

Mackie treats the thesis that value is in the world as interchangeable with the thesis that value is *objective* (see, e.g., p. 15). I believe this is not an innocuous variation of terminology; I think it insinuates, into Mackie's account of the content of value experience, a specific and disputable philosophical conception of the world (or the real, or the factual). This opens the possibility that when Mackie argues that the phenomenology of value experience embodies an error, his arguments involve a misconstrual of what the appearances invite us to believe.

The notion of objectivity that I think Mackie has in mind is one that would be explained by contrast with a suitable notion of subjectivity. A subjective property, in the relevant sense, is one such that no adequate conception of what it is for a thing to possess it is available except in terms of how the thing would, in suitable circumstances, affect a subject – a sentient being.² (Think of affective properties like amusingness, or sensory secondary qualities like colours, according to a familiar conception in which what it is to *be*, say, red is not adequately conceived independently of the idea of *looking* red; this would preclude identifying the property of being red with a categorical ground for something's disposition to look red in suitable circumstances.) What is objective, in the relevant sense, is what is not subjective. Thus Mackie's implied doctrine that whatever is part of the fabric of the world is objective, if it is interpreted in this way, amounts to the doctrine that the world is fully describable in terms of properties that can be understood without essential reference to their effects on sentient beings. (Categorical grounds for affective or secondary properties can be part of the fabric of the world, on this view, even though the subjective properties they sustain cannot.)

Mackie cites two traditional reasons for holding that value is not in the world, the argument from relativity and the argument from queerness. (He supplements them with the claim that the illusion which he takes them to reveal, embedded in the phenomenology of value experience, can be explained in terms of 'patterns of objectification' (pp. 42–6).) Both

² I do not say that a subjective property is one which must be analysed in terms of its effects on subjects, because of the difficulty of seeing how it can be an *analysis* of, say, greenness to characterize it as a disposition to look *green* under suitable circumstances (and how else is the relevant effect to be described?). See section IV below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aesthetic value

arguments seem to owe their apparent cogency to the prior assumption that the world is objective in something like the sense I have just sketched.

Mackie's presentation of the argument from relativity (pp. 36–8) is partly spoiled by a tendency to slide between variation in valuing from one community to another, or within communities, and disagreement in valuing, as if those were the same thing. A shallow subjectivism might start from the thought that striking differences between, say, the artefacts of different cultures must result from a *disagreement* in valuing. This would yield an argument against any serious use, in this connection, of the notion of truth or the notion of the world: at most one of a pair of incompatible sets of valuing could match the world, and, since there is no unprejudiced way of telling which, we had better conclude that neither does. But this line of thought would be very crude. Our appreciating what we do need not preclude our supposing that there are different values, to which we are perhaps insensitive, in the artefacts of remote cultures – as if, when we take the value we find in the objects we appreciate to be really there in them, we use up all the room the world might afford for aesthetic merit to occupy. In fact it is remarkable, and heartening, to what extent, without losing hold of the sensitivities from which we begin, we can learn to find worth in what seems at first too alien to appreciate.

I think the argument Mackie intends is not this crude argument, but one that starts from the fact of *variation* in valuing (not necessarily amounting to disagreement), and turns on the claim that such variation is 'more readily explained by the hypothesis that [the valuing] reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they reflect perceptions . . . of objective values' (p. 37).³ Now the role of a way of life, in a plausible story about what presents itself as a sensitivity to the value in a particular range of aesthetic objects, is no doubt sufficiently analogous to the role of a specific sensory apparatus, in a plausible story about what presents itself as a sensitivity to (for instance) colours, to warrant the thought that the values are subjective in something like the sense suggested above.⁴ But this rules out supposing that the sensitivity is just that – a capacity to detect and respond to something that is part of the fabric of the world – only if we make the prior assumption that nothing subjective, in that sense, is found in the world. The word 'objective' is essential to Mackie's formulation of the hypothesis he wants us to reject; if 'objective' were deleted, it would no longer seem so

³ I have omitted some words which suggest, again, the idea that the divergent perceptions would have to be in competition. Certainly any sensible cognitivism must make room for the thought that many of the experiences which purport to be perceptions of value are, as Mackie says, 'seriously inadequate and badly distorted'. But sheer variation does not itself justify that thought.

⁴ Membership of a community, or sympathetic understanding of its way of life, would constitute a point of view, in the extended sense to be introduced in section III below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN MCDOWELL

clear that we have to choose.⁵

As for the argument from queerness (pp. 38–42): there would indeed be something weird (to put it mildly) about the idea of a property which, while retaining the ‘phenomenal’ character of experienced value, was conceived to be part of the world as objectively characterized. It would be as if we tried to construct a conception of amusingness which was fully intelligible otherwise than in terms of the characteristic human responses to what is amusing, but which nevertheless contrived somehow to retain the ‘phenomenal’ aspect of amusingness as we experience it in those responses.⁶ But the phenomenology of value experience sets up this strain only if we insist on interpreting it in terms of a conception of the world as objective in the sense I have sketched.⁷

What emerges, then, is the prospect of a debate about whether it is compulsory to accept the equation of the world (what is real or factual) with what is objective in the relevant sense. If it is not compulsory, the phenomenology can be differently understood, so as to be, perhaps, immune to the traditional arguments. (And if there is no illusion to explain, Mackie’s supplementation of the traditional arguments falls away as superfluous.)

When we consider aesthetic value in particular, there is a special advantage in shifting discussion away from Mackie’s arguments to the question whether those arguments attack the right target. The issue is this: if we grant that we cannot construct a conception of aesthetic value that is

⁵ What emerges here is the possibility that the explanation of the perceptions as reflecting ways of life might not amount to an explaining *away* of what the perceptions purport to discover in reality.

⁶ I should sympathize with anyone who found this idea incoherent; whereas Mackie insists that his target is a thought which is coherent (though, of course, false). This might cast doubt on my interpretation of Mackie, were it not that this issue about coherence is duplicated in the case of Mackie’s views about colour. Here he takes it to be coherent, although false, that there are colour properties which are not secondary but primary (that is, which characterize things independently of their effect on perceivers), but which ‘resemble’ colours as they figure in our experience (that is, which retain the ‘phenomenal’ aspect of our ordinary notion of colours). This thought is rejected on grounds of explanatory superfluity rather than queerness (though one might well suggest that an argument from queerness would be pretty effective in this case). See Mackie’s *Problems from Locke* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 10–11, 18–19. I believe this idea of primary qualities which ‘resemble’ colours as we see them can seem coherent only in the context of a quite disputable view of how colours figure in our experience: one which is at variance, moreover, with Mackie’s official account of that matter.

⁷ I have ignored the epistemological component of Mackie’s argument from queerness, in which he claims that if one holds that value is in the world, one must postulate a special faculty (‘intuition’) to be what detects it. If the aim is, as Mackie takes it to be, to insist on the existence of primary qualities that ‘resemble’ value properties as we experience them, it is hard to see how inventing a sense-like faculty would help. For surely values would seem to stand to any such faculty in the same sort of relation as that in which colours stand to the faculty of vision, thus remaining stubbornly non-primary.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aesthetic value

detached from the idea of an experience of an object's seeming to have it, any more than we can construct a conception of amusingness that is detached from the idea of the responses that constitute finding something amusing, are we thereby debarred from supposing that we find aesthetic value (or amusingness) in the world? This is a general question about the status of properties that are not conceivable independently of sentient responses to them. Now the precise nature of the response in question can vary from case to case. And this means that we can let Mackie's harping on the queerness of, in particular, objective *prescriptivity* fade into the background; which is an improvement, since 'prescriptivity' suggests a specific response involving value's appeal to the *will*, and this is at best questionably appropriate for ethical value in general, and surely inappropriate for aesthetic value.

Mackie claims (p. 43) that the inclination to take value experience to be cognitive is less entrenched with aesthetic value than with moral value. This strikes me as exactly the reverse of the truth: and I think the reason is connected with the irrelevance, or near irrelevance, of the will to an account of aesthetic value. The phenomenology of value experience in general suggests a visual model for our dealings with value. In the moral case we are prone to be tempted away from that model by the distracting influence of the concept of choice or decision; whereas in the aesthetic case – so long as we are not corrupted by an easy philosophical assimilation – that temptation is not operative. (I think the temptation should be resisted in the moral case too, but that is another story.)

III

The conception of the world as objective, in something like the sense I have sketched, is given an explicit and highly illuminating discussion by Bernard Williams in *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*.⁸ In this section I shall set out some salient features of Williams's discussion, with a view to raising the question whether the conception he describes can succeed in underwriting Mackie's metaphysically disparaging attitude to values.

The fundamental idea is the idea of the distinction between reality and appearance (see p. 241). The way the world really is must be distinguished from ways the world appears to be only because the recipient of the appearance occupies some local or parochial point of view.⁹ An illustration of this distinction, with a literal application of the notion of a point of view, is afforded by the way we correct for the angle from which we are observing

⁸ Harmondsworth, 1978: see especially pp. 241 ff.

⁹ For the phrase 'point of view' see, e.g., p. 245. Williams also uses, apparently interchangeably with the notion of a point of view, the notion of a perspective (see, e.g., p. 243). Ted Cohen has persuaded me that this is a misuse of the notion of a perspective; but I think the attractiveness of the line of thought Williams sets out is not affected.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN MCDOWELL

a plane surface when we form a judgement about its true shape.¹⁰ But this use of the notion of a special point of view, as something requiring to be transcended if we are to achieve a conception of things as they are in themselves, lends itself naturally to metaphorical extension. Thus it is natural to think of possession of the special perceptual apparatus involved in colour vision as constituting a special point of view; and a generalization of this line of thought is what underlies the familiar philosophical thought that a description of the world as it really is would leave out the secondary qualities. Again, a description of something as amusing issues from a peculiarly human point of view, constituted, in this case, by certain 'human tastes and interests' (p. 243); and a similar line of thought suggests that amusingness cannot belong to a description of things as they are in themselves.

Williams does not explicitly discuss the case of value as such. Perhaps amusingness is already an example of an aesthetic value. In any case, the evident analogy between relativity to tastes and interests and relativity to sensory peculiarities suggests a ready extension to value of the line of thought that Williams spells out about secondary qualities.

It is natural to wonder whether the idea of transcending special points of view really makes sense. Surely any conception of reality we could achieve would still be *our* conception of reality, from a point of view we occupied; the idea of a view from nowhere is incoherent.¹¹ Williams notices this difficulty, and responds as follows (p. 244):

... there is no suggestion that we should try to describe a world without ourselves using any concepts, or without using concepts which we, human beings, can understand. The suggestion is that there are possible descriptions of the world using concepts which are not peculiarly ours, and not peculiarly relative to our experience. Such a description would be that which would be arrived at, as C. S. Peirce put it, if scientific enquiry continued long enough: it is the content of that 'final opinion' which Peirce believed that enquiry would inevitably converge upon, a 'final opinion ... independent not indeed of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought'.¹²

It is worth making explicit the distinctive character of the view of scientific enquiry that Williams here embraces. Scientific enquiry must be conceived as defined by a determinate method – one capable of yielding its

¹⁰ The illustration is not Williams's: he goes straight to the metaphorical use of the notion of a point of view.

¹¹ It is important to remember how far we are from a literal application of the notion of a point of view. The thought that there cannot be a view from nowhere is not the Berkeleyan thought that any conception of how things are must be a conception of how things would strike a possible perceiver.

¹² The quotation is from 'A Critical Review of Berkeley's Idealism', in Philip P. Wiener (ed.), *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a World of Chance)* (New York, 1966), p. 82.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aesthetic value

practitioners some sort of assurance that they are on a path which, if properly followed, would lead at the limit to the ideal convergence that Peirce envisaged. And scientific enquiry, so conceived, is taken to be a pure mode of investigation of the world, uncontaminated in itself by relativity to anything local or parochial. When a candidate mode of investigation of reality is such that its upshot is vulnerable to the line of thought exemplified in the discussion of secondary qualities, someone can always complain, about the view of reality which that candidate yields, 'That is merely how things strike *us*, constituted as we are.' Facts about ourselves, additional to anything required of an investigator as such, prevent our achieving, in that way, an undistorted view of the world as it really is. But it is not so with scientific enquiry on the Peircean view which Williams endorses. Not that we cannot be engaged in scientific enquiry and still get reality wrong. But that will be because of our own fallibility; or perhaps because of our distance from the ideal end-point – perhaps there are some things we cannot get right until we are nearer getting everything right than we are. The method itself is conceived as intrinsically non-distorting; as a pure or transparent mode of access to reality.

So far we have been considering the conception of the world as it is in itself, that is, independently of the way it appears from this or that special point of view. What Williams calls 'the absolute conception of reality' is something arrived at by extending the conception of the world as it is in itself so as to encompass and be able to explain the various appearances (see p. 245; the extension will be considered further in section iv below). Now Williams's need for something to play the role he envisages for scientific enquiry emerges very clearly from a dilemma with which he confronts the absolute conception of reality in an important earlier passage (pp. 64–7). If, on the one hand, the absolute conception does not involve any determinate substance (any determinate conception of things as being one way rather than another), but is a matter of conceiving the world merely as whatever it is of which the various particular appearances are appearances, then it would be self-deceptive to suppose we have anything against which we could assess, and in terms of which we could explain, the various appearances; as Williams puts it (p. 65), 'the conception of an independent reality ... slips out of the picture, leaving us only with a variety of possible representations to measure against each other, with nothing to mediate between them'. If, on the other hand, we require the absolute conception to be a determinate conception of the way things are in themselves, then we are vulnerable to the worry that attaining such a conception is only attaining another particular point of view, so that all we have is a conception of how things appear from there – another appearance to add to the others, not something transcending appearance, in terms of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN MCDOWELL

which all appearances could be explained.

It seems clear that this dilemma can fail to be fatal to the absolute conception only if we take ourselves to be equipped with a pure or transparent mode of access to reality as it is in itself, such as is constituted by scientific enquiry on Williams's Peircean conception. (It was not inevitable that this abstract requirement should seem to be met by science, as opposed to, for instance, divine revelation; but in our culture the casting of science in the necessary role is overwhelmingly natural.) The idea that we have a transparent mode of access to reality can permit us to occupy something like the second horn of the dilemma. It entitles us to claim to have, if not 'a determinate picture of what the world is like independent of any knowledge or representation in thought' (p. 65), at least a determinate picture of a determinate picture of what the world is like in itself,¹³ and an assurance that at least the general shape of current science's (first-order) world-view is on the right lines. And the conception of science as transparent blunts the point of the second horn as Williams presents the dilemma. The determinacy in the scientific picture of the world does not carry with it any vulnerability to the accusation that that picture is only how things appear from another point of view (the scientific point of view); scientific enquiry is conceived as progressively revealing to us reality as it is in itself. So the idea of a transparent mode of access to the world disarms the dilemma. And it seems clear that nothing else would serve; if the absolute conception is not to be empty (the first horn), it requires the idea of a mode of investigation that gives us the world itself, as that against which all mere representations of it are to be measured.

Williams himself does not use the absolute conception of reality in order to recommend an anti-cognitivist position about the properties that would be excluded from the Peircean description of the world. Indeed, he is explicit to the contrary about the case of colour (see p. 254, n. 19): his claim is not that we can know only what figures in its own right in the absolute conception of things, but only that our knowledge must be 'comprehensibly related' to the absolute conception, and this allows, he says, the possibility of knowing that something is, say, green. But it would be unsurprising if this hospitality to an apparent cognitivism struck someone as a merely superficial terminological tolerance. (This would be particularly unsurprising in someone who was less cautious than Williams is committed to being about the precise manner in which the non-absolute parts of our knowledge – or, as such a person might prefer, 'knowledge' – are to be comprehensibly related to the absolute conception of reality. I

¹³ For the retreat to the second-order, cf. Williams, p. 301: 'a view of the world (or at least the coherent conception of such a view) which contains a theory of error: which can explain the existence of rival views, and of itself'.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aesthetic value

shall return to Williams's caution, about the case of colour in particular, in section IV below.) If the absolute conception is the frame within which all reflection on our cognitive dealings with the world must take place, then the contrast between reality and appearance is irresistibly brought into play – that is, after all, where we began – with secondary and affective qualities, and value, on the side of the appearances. Williams indeed speaks with apparent approval of 'the idea . . . that the scientific picture presents the reality of which the secondary qualities, as perceived, are appearances' (p. 245). Perhaps it is only a matter of temperament whether one finds it natural at such a point, as Williams evidently does not, to say not just 'appearances' but 'mere appearances'. In understanding the inclination to add 'mere', we can understand how the thesis that all our knowledge must be comprehensibly related to the absolute conception might seem to leave no room for any substantive objection to Mackie's implied doctrine that what is *strictly* real, or part of the world, is objective. Perhaps this view might allow a more relaxed use of 'world' or 'reality' to pass muster on occasion, if explicitly recognized as non-strict. But the absolute conception cannot let such a relaxed use pass for all purposes, on pain of blurring the indispensable distinction between reality and appearance.

I conjecture, then, that what seems to justify Mackie's assumption that what is real, or part of the world, is objective – or perhaps what accounts for his not seeing that thesis as something for which a justification may be demanded – is something like the absolute conception of reality. But there is room for scepticism about the strength of any justification it can afford. I shall suggest two different grounds for scepticism in the two sections which follow.

IV

The absolute conception owes what credentials it has, as the frame for all reflection about our cognitive relations with the world, to its explanatory aspirations. The conception of the world as it is in itself is not supposed to be a mere highest common factor, 'the most that a set of very different observers could arrive at, like some cosmic United Nations resolution' (p. 244). Mere consensus could not by itself justify the claim to present the reality of which the non-agreed residues are appearances. The claim of the conception of the world as it is independently of observers (the objective conception of the world) to monopolize the 'reality' side of the distinction between reality and appearance depends on the possibility of extending it so as to become the absolute conception: that is, extending it so as to embrace and explain the particular points of view it transcends. (See especially pp. 245–6.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-34967-3 - Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics

Edited by Eva Schaper

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN MCDOWELL

But there is room for doubt about this extension. Can the expansion to embrace the various local points of view be undertaken in the objective spirit that would be required for its upshot to sustain the correlation between objectivity and reality? Or would it necessitate – surely defeating the project – a regression from the attempt to transcend particular points of view, in order to achieve an undistorted picture of reality as it is in itself, to an unregenerate occupation of the points of view that were to be transcended?

Take the case of colour. Williams considers an account of colour properties as dispositions to look red, green, etc., in certain circumstances; but he expresses scepticism about it, on the ground that ‘it leaves us with the discouraging task of explaining “... looks green” in some way which does not presuppose any prior understanding of “... is green”’ (p. 243). This pessimism seems well placed; and what it amounts to is the thought that the content of the appearances to be explained in this case – how it is that things appear from the point of view in question – is not so much as intelligible except on the basis of occupying the point of view. (Not that one has to suppose always that things are coloured the way they appear to be. But only someone who has, or at least might have, a use for ‘... is green’ can understand what it is for something to look green.) Thus an explanation of the appearances in this case would have to address itself exclusively to occupants of the point of view in question, on pain of unintelligibility in its formulation of its explicandum. And how could such an explanation help show us how to transcend that point of view, let alone help convince us that transcending it is necessary if we are to achieve a correct conception of our relation to reality?

Williams writes of ‘understanding . . . , at a general and reflective level, why things *appear variously coloured* to various observers’ (p. 242, my emphasis). Of course there is no disputing the possibility of such understanding, on the basis of information about the behaviour of light and the construction of visual equipment. But it seems to be an illusion to suppose that such understanding could still be forthcoming after we had definitively left behind a view of the world which represents colours as properties that things have (it would be a mere pleonasm to say ‘really have’): in such a position, we would no longer understand what it was that we were supposed to be explaining. And it is mysterious how we are to be sustained in our resolve to abandon, or at least disparage, a point of view by a thought that is not thinkable anywhere else.

This is not a difficulty about the case of colours alone. Williams remarks that the problem about colours ‘is part of a larger question, how the partial views and local experiences are themselves to be related to the world as conceived in independence of them’ (p. 244). The general idea is that in an