

REVIEW

James O. Young, ed. *Semantics of Aesthetic Judgements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xi + 214 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-871459-0

Aesthetic discourse harbours complex phenomena that present difficult challenges to several branches of philosophy. The recent volume under review, edited by James O. Young, on the semantics of aesthetic judgements attempts to address some of the most intricate questions. It brings together philosophers of art and philosophers of language to discuss subjectivism about aesthetic judgements and the semantics of aesthetic predicates. According to versions of subjectivism that are relevant with respect to the discussions in the volume, 'aesthetic properties exist as response-dependent properties and [...] make possible a subjectivist cognitivism about aesthetic judgments' (p. 4).

Semantically speaking, current subjectivist accounts are typically cast in either contextualist or relativist terms. According to contextualism, the semantic content of an utterance of 'X is beautiful' contains a judge for whom X is beautiful as its constituent part. According to relativism, the judge is not contained in the semantic content of the utterance, but is one of the parameters with respect to which utterances are assessed as true or false. That is, according to contextualism, an utterance of 'X is beautiful' expresses the proposition *that X is beautiful for J* (J being a judge) that gets evaluated as true or false with respect to possible worlds (and possibly times) and, according to relativism, it expresses the proposition *that X is beautiful* that gets evaluated as true or false with respect to possible worlds and judges (and possibly times). Based on this, contextualism takes the response-dependent nature of aesthetic properties to consist in the notion that aesthetic properties are themselves relative (that is, contain judges as their constituents), while relativism takes them to consist in the notion that the instantiation of aesthetic properties is relative (that is, objects have them only relative to a judge).

The volume contains nine original essays (apart from the editor's introduction). In his introduction (pp. 1–16), Young provides a lucid description of the most important notions, the most pressing problems, and the most notable approaches. He also puts every essay in its place within the volume. The contributed essays are the following. Louise McNally and Isidora Stojanovic categorize 'Aesthetic Adjectives' (pp. 17–37); Dan López de Sa's paper is about 'Making Beautiful Things' (pp. 28–60); 'Disputing Taste' (pp. 61–81) is the subject-matter of Dominic McIver Lopes's paper; Tim Sundell explains 'Aesthetic Negotiations' (pp. 82–105); David Davies analyses 'The Semantics of Sibleyan

Aesthetic Judgements' (pp. 106–20); Berit Brogaard proposes 'A Semantic Framework for Aesthetic Expressions' (pp. 121–39); Elisabeth Schellekens discusses 'Value Judgements and Standards of Normative Assessment' (pp. 140–59); Michael J. Raven raises his voice 'Against the Semantic Orientation towards Aesthetic Judgement' (pp. 160–84); finally, Carl Matheson argues that 'We Really Shouldn't Be Having this Conversation' (pp. 185–212). I am going to discuss some of the main ideas presented in these papers. Needless to say, I can barely scratch the surface of the rich and complex considerations the reader may find in the book.

The hallmark of subjectivism in the above sense is the possibility of faultless disagreements about aesthetic matters. A situation is an instance of faultless disagreement provided two speakers present positions that are mutually incompatible, yet neither of them has committed any mistake by adhering to their respective positions.¹ Subjectivism with respect to aesthetic discourse has it that such situations are available in aesthetic disputes. In saying so, subjectivists bring aesthetic predicates close to predicates of personal taste like 'tasty' or 'funny'; in particular, taste properties that are expressed by predicates of personal taste are usually supposed to be response-dependent (in some way, depending on one's overall theoretical approach), and, given subjectivism, the same is claimed to hold about aesthetic properties. It is widely – though not universally – recognized that taste disagreements can be faultless. And it seems that if aesthetic predicates resemble taste predicates in certain vital respects, there should also be faultless aesthetic disagreements as well. Be that as it may, the majority of contributors present serious reservations about this position.

I start by summarizing Michael Raven's considerations. His scepticism regarding the current debates about faultless disagreements in aesthetics is radical in a certain sense. Although he does not frame it in this way, it can be said that his scepticism is based on rejecting the position that was rather forcefully articulated by semantic minimalists, most notably Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore in their *Insensitive Semantics*. They claim that it is not the business of semanticists to say what the properties they postulate are when specifying the truth-conditions of judgements; it is the job of metaphysicians to give an explanation of these properties that would comply with the proposed truth-conditions.² Extending this view to the realm of aesthetics, semanticists should not bother

¹ A classic statement of the idea of faultless disagreements can be found in Max Kölbel, 'Faultless Disagreement', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 53–73. See Alison Hills, 'Faultless Moral Disagreement', *Ratio* 26 (2013): 412–13, for an overview of various definitions of faultless disagreement that can be found in Kölbel's paper.

² Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore, *Insensitive Semantics: A Defense of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Act Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), chap. 11.

with what aesthetic properties are, but simply specify the truth-conditions of aesthetic judgements, and someone else should propose a theory of aesthetic properties that fits the semanticists' findings. Raven's assessment of the dispute between contextualism and relativism (the latter position labelled by him 'aesthetic evaluativism') can be read as a symptom of semantics being independent from metaphysics. The predominance of what he calls 'the semantic orientation' results in there being 'little discussion of how to understand the underlying states of the world which might give rise to the relative truth of an aesthetic judgement' (p. 161). This is, according to him, an unwelcome situation, because it results in approaching aesthetic problems as being dependent on the semantics of language. An instance of such a problem is the tension between the subjectivity of aesthetic judgements and their universality that is contained in the Humean approach (p. 160). The very possibility of faultless disagreements can be supposed to speak for the subjectivity of aesthetic judgements as opposed to their universality (p. 165). However, the dominant semantically oriented approaches – contextualism and relativism – are not in a position to show that aesthetic facts are such that they approve of this kind of resolution. Raven shows that both of these approaches are problematic because of their inability to preserve the disagreement part of faultless disagreements (though they both are in a position to preserve the faultlessness part). This is a very interesting point because it is generally admitted that relativists are able to do full justice to the disagreement part.³ The underlying moral of this discussion is that the dispute between contextualists and relativists in aesthetics would not have arisen if we had a better understanding of what aesthetic properties are and whether they really are response-dependent (as both approaches assume) rather than response-independent. These problems cannot be approached in a satisfactory way if we stick to the semantic orientation.

But not all the contributions to this collection of essays are to be blamed for the purely semantic orientation. Elisabeth Schellekens's paper addresses a meta-physical question – it contains a direct challenge to the idea that aesthetic properties are a kind of response-dependent property. Schellekens's criticism is particularly concerned with some fitting-attitude theories, particularly the sensibility theory originated by David Wiggins.⁴ According to them, 'value properties [such as aesthetic properties] are analysed in terms of certain

³ Needless to say, one may also embark on various attempts in the contextualist literature that are intended to preserve the disagreement part. In the present volume, this position is most notably adopted by Dan López de Sa, Tim Sundell, and Dominic McIver Lopes.

⁴ See David Wiggins, 'A Sensible Subjectivism', in *Needs, Values, Truth*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 185–214.

correlated responses' (p. 144), such as emotional responses that are deemed appropriate with respect to the object in question (where the notion of appropriateness can reasonably be understood in different ways; see p. 156). Her main argument against the application of the fitting-attitude theories to the realm of aesthetics consists in questioning whether the ascription of an aesthetic property to an object of appreciation as well as the emotional response to the object in question have good grounds (p. 148). Schellekens argues that there is 'significant instability and variability of the relation between [aesthetic] property and [emotional] response' (p. 154). She describes two kinds of situation to justify this claim: (i) we may ascribe aesthetic properties to objects independently of any emotional response, in which case an emotional response cannot be the ground for ascribing aesthetic properties, and (ii) we may emotionally respond to an object in a certain way without ascribing to it an aesthetic property that is supposed to be associated with the kind of response in question. As a result, justifying 'an aesthetic judgement merely by appealing to the accompanying response [...] seems far trickier' (p. 154) than in the case of ordinary taste judgements.⁵ She thus suggests considering aesthetic realism as a more suitable approach to aesthetic properties.

Schellekens's argument is important in demonstrating that aesthetic properties cannot be mixed up with some other value properties. For example, properties of personal taste (like *being tasty* or *being too sweet*) seem perfectly fit for the response-dependent explication – a cake is too sweet only provided a certain person finds it too sweet on the basis of their experiences with the cake. Schellekens is surely right in claiming that an analogous simple explication is not available for aesthetic properties because two objects of appreciation can both be found to elicit the same kind of emotional response, but only one of them is valued as beautiful (on the basis of the elicited response) while the other one is valued as ugly (also on the basis of the elicited response). Take our response to the harmony of objects of appreciation as an example: 'being harmonious can constitute an aesthetic merit in one context (such as in Impressionist painting) whilst serving as an aesthetic demerit in another (such as in atonal music)' (p. 153). It thus seems that the appreciator's responses to the objects are unhelpful for explicating aesthetic properties.⁶

⁵ As Schellekens says, we judge that something is disgusting, for example, simply on the basis of our feelings of disgust (that is, our emotional response) when confronted with the thing in question.

⁶ A recent account that rejects the idea of separate treatments of aesthetic properties and taste properties can be found in Max Kölbel, 'Aesthetic Judge-Dependence and Expertise', *Inquiry* 59 (2016): 589–617.

Schellekens's view coheres with what is claimed by Louise McNally and Isidora Stojanovic in their joint paper. They argue that aesthetic predicates are not predicates of personal taste and give an attempt at specifying what makes an adjective an aesthetic adjective on the basis of linguistic criteria. There is, however, one important difference: unlike Schellekens, McNally and Stojanovic do not seem to give up the subjectivist approach to aesthetic properties. They argue that aesthetic predicates like 'beautiful' are multidimensional and non-measurable. According to them, non-measurability is a source of subjectivity, which may take either of the following two forms: subjective properties can be either such that they 'entail an experiencer' or 'imply a positive or negative evaluation on the part of the speaker' (p. 23). Predicates of personal taste express properties that are subjective in the former sense while aesthetic predicates express properties that are evaluative in the latter sense. This is based on applying several linguistic tests that consist in assessing the felicity of occurrences of both kinds of predicate within some linguistic constructions. That is why there is a gap between predicates of personal taste and aesthetic predicates, despite both of them being subjective in a sense. Thus McNally and Stojanovic do not claim that aesthetic predicates deserve an objectivist treatment, although they suggest that they have to be approached in a somewhat different way than predicates of personal taste.

A closely related claim is made by David Davies. He argues that aesthetic predicates expressing so-called Sibleyan concepts are not susceptible to the kind of treatment that is sometimes applied to predicates of personal taste. In particular, Davies discusses Andy Egan's proposal according to which taste predicates are used by the speakers to self-ascribe dispositions to respond to an object in a certain way;⁷ the aim of the disputes about taste is then to motivate one's interlocutor to self-ascribe the same disposition. Davies argues that a more adequate treatment of Sibleyan aesthetic judgements takes them 'as ascriptions of properties to entities in virtue of which they affect a certain class of receivers (those with taste) in certain ways' (p. 113). Davies further investigates what kind of properties may correspond to Sibleyan concepts. He claims that they can be construed either as response-dependent properties or as response-independent properties. The availability of the response-independent construal can be motivated by the idea that

while the analysis of Sibleyan aesthetic concepts makes essential references to 'a certain class of receivers' – those with taste who are either able to detect response-independent aesthetic properties, or whose responses are constitutive of the concepts – reference to

⁷ Andy Egan, 'Disputing about Taste', in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 247–86.

the responses of such receivers need not enter into the semantic analysis of judgments [...]. (p. 115)

Regardless of which construal of Sibleyan concepts is adopted, it seems that the kind of proposal adopted by Egan is wanting. Nevertheless, Davies admits, at the very end of the paper, that Egan's proposal 'may have a part to play in a comprehensive account of our aesthetic judgments' (p. 119).

The idea that the semantics that can be applied to predicates of personal taste cannot be extended to aesthetic predicates is also defended in Berit Brogaard's contribution. She joins Davies in claiming that the semantics of taste predicates cannot be correctly extended to thick (that is, Sibleyan) aesthetic expressions such as 'balanced', 'delicate', and 'insipid', which connote both a descriptive component and an evaluative component – 'applying the thick expressions correctly seems to require competence and experience' (p. 129), which means that their application cannot be just a matter of subjective preferences or opinions (as it happens with predicates of personal taste). Brogaard develops this idea within her special relativist semantics of aesthetic expressions, which is applied to both thin and thick aesthetic expressions. The crucial role in this approach is assigned to real – rather than ideal – art critics that are sufficiently trained in assessing artworks and are properly situated relative to the work under assessment. Aesthetic standards of the critics (unlike those of the untrained) are what is relevant for determining the truth-values of aesthetic utterances (pp. 131–34). Admittedly, this approach provides a more objective framework than other relativist approaches according to which the truth-values of aesthetic utterances can be determined relative to anyone's standards – this would not be desirable in aesthetics, as Brogaard claims (p. 137). At the same time, however, aesthetic properties can reasonably be understood as rather close to ordinary response-dependent properties (for example, personal taste properties) – they are properties that are dependent on art critics' responses. Nevertheless, Brogaard prefers to treat them as self-locating properties that determine extensions only relative to possible worlds and art critics' aesthetic standards (p. 136).

The contributions summarized so far are not particularly concerned with the phenomenon of faultless disagreements in the realm of aesthetics. It seems that several of the authors would reject the idea that aesthetic disagreements could be faultless – this is particularly true of the authors with realist inclinations. In some other contributions, faultless disagreements are either tacitly assumed or implicitly tolerated. Nevertheless, three papers in the volume openly deal with faultless disagreements.

The idea that aesthetic disagreements can be faultless is partly defended in Dan López de Sa's contribution. His main intention is dispelling certain worries

against treating disagreements in aesthetics as faultless (p. 39). Building on David Lewis's theory of values,⁸ he takes values as response-dependent properties that are grounded in our attitudes of valuing (p. 44). An object can be said to have a value provided agents are disposed to respond to the object by producing appropriate attitudes of valuing. This version of contextualism nicely explains why certain disagreements can be faultless: if one speaker utters 'X is funny' and another responds with 'X is not funny', the former says that X amuses her while the latter says that X does not amuse him – both can be true and thus the speakers have made no mistake. López de Sa further explains why the speakers can be said to disagree – despite the fact that the two propositions are fully compatible, it is argued that the notion of disagreement is flexible, so that it is not required that the propositions in question be contradictory (p. 48); in fact, contextualists uncovered several options in which two speakers may disagree without adhering to contradictory propositions (for example, they may disagree in the sense of adopting incompatible non-doxastic attitudes or in the sense of negotiating taste standards). Based on this, contextualism is in a position to explain the existence of faultless disagreements. What it fails to explain, however, is that we usually agree that by uttering 'X is funny' and 'X is not funny' the speakers *do* express something contradictory (p. 49). According to López de Sa, this can be explained provided contextualism is supplemented with the idea that when speakers utter 'X is funny' and 'X is not funny', respectively, they presuppose that they are relevantly alike regarding what is funny. Thus, when one utters 'X is not funny' by way of responding to an utterance of 'X is funny', one rejects that one is relevantly alike the speaker of 'X is funny' – the former contradicts the latter's presupposition. Now, this summary clearly concerns ordinary predicates of personal taste. Is it possible to extend these considerations to disputes that involve 'X is beautiful' and 'X is not beautiful'? López de Sa makes some initial steps towards enabling the positive answer 'without prejudging the final outcome' (p. 53). He seems to argue that the difference between taste disagreements and aesthetic disagreements can be just a matter of degree rather than substance. For example, it might be argued that aesthetic disagreements are not faultless because it might turn out that 'we are all, in fact, relevantly alike' with respect to the beautiful as opposed to the funny or the tasty (p. 57); yet this is not essential to the account.

Tim Sundell's contribution presents a more courageous attempt to show that no difference between predicates of personal taste and aesthetic predicates would call for their separate semantic treatment (see p. 100). His position thus

⁸ David Lewis, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989): 113–38.

contradicts Brogaard's, for example. Although he admits that the former are, what he calls, typically low-pressure predicates while the latter are typically high-pressure predicates, the difference is not semantically relevant. The latter predicates put more pressure on the interlocutors to resolve conflicts between them than the former predicates (this is because the former are based on standards that are expansive in Sundell's terms while the latter are based on more local standards; p. 103). Sundell argues that the treatments according to which aesthetic predicates, as opposed to predicates of personal taste, require an objectivist or invariantist explanation cannot withstand the data and that the gap between the two kinds of predicate is much narrower than it might seem. This is because some taste disagreements can be as persistent as some aesthetic disagreements and some aesthetic disagreements can be easily resolved by pointing to differing standards in the same way as some taste disagreements (pp. 87–89; see also pp. 100–101). Building on recent considerations about metalinguistic uses of certain kinds of predicate – namely, gradable adjectives that concern 'how the expressions employed [...] should be used' (p. 94) –⁹ Sundell takes aesthetic debates to be metalinguistic negotiations that concern aesthetic standards employed by the speakers. The outcome of such negotiations is not dictated by the semantics of predicates (p. 96).

Both López de Sa and Sundell defend the view that aesthetic predicates are semantically close to predicates of personal taste. Sundell explicitly states that adopting this position cannot be understood as a defence of subjectivism as opposed to objectivism (realism) (p. 92) – and the position he adopted can be made consistent with both. As we have seen, other contributions in the volume adopt views that treat the two kinds of predicates as separate. Several authors voiced the idea that there must be such a difference between them because aesthetic predicates cannot be amenable to a subjectivist treatment. Given the fact that Sundell shows otherwise – his account convincingly demonstrates that taste disagreements and aesthetic disagreements are closely similar to each other in certain vital respects –, such worries can perhaps be dispelled.

Dominic McIver Lopes is another author who is willing to admit that aesthetic disagreements can be faultless. His approach, however, differs from the previous two in that he claims that a substantive difference exists between aesthetically used predicates and non-aesthetically used (taste) predicates. The difference is obvious in that 'aesthetic disputes target objects of aesthetic interest, not simply traits of disputing parties' (p. 64); on the other hand, non-aesthetically used taste predicates just demonstrate the speakers' preferences. Apart from this crucial

⁹ Chris Barker, 'The Dynamics of Vagueness', *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (2002): 1–36.

feature of aesthetic disputes, Lopes adds some other features: aesthetic disputes (i) are settled in the social context of the participants (p. 64), (ii) are persistent (p. 65), (iii) contain proper disagreements (p. 66) that (iv) can be faultless (p. 67). The main aim of Lopes's paper consists in defending a special version of the contextualist semantics of aesthetic judgements. He has it that his approach is able to do full justice to what he takes to be the core point of aesthetic disputes – namely, 'to induce the attribution of aesthetic properties to works in appropriate genres' (p. 76), where genres are understood as a certain kind of social practice which provide frameworks for aesthetic appreciation. He argues that this view helps to make better predictions about aesthetic disputes than the competing relativist picture developed, most notably, by Andy Egan.¹⁰ What we have here is a theory that (i) is properly contextualist, (ii) is capable of treating aesthetically used predicates as being different from ordinary taste predicates, and (iii) makes room for aesthetic faultless disagreements.

Carl Matheson discusses not the phenomenon of disagreement, but a slightly different phenomenon that similarly prevents people from agreeing with one another – namely, (rational) disengagement in science and art or, rather, theories of art (especially, literary criticism). Invoking the notion of practical incommensurability, he deals with the question of when it is rationally permissible for scientists and art theorists to ignore the work of their peers (p. 185). Practical incommensurability 'between two theories concerns the difficulty of mutual comprehension between their proponents' (p. 191). In science, if the costs of attempts at comprehending the other's position are too high compared to the benefits, it is rational for the scientist to ignore the position. Based on this, there is no way for the two scientists to come to an agreement. Matheson shows that this model can be extended beyond science. The same kind of phenomenon also arises with respect to art criticism. More precisely, the extension is rather straightforward provided every literary theorist works within a single framework – in such a case, it might be disadvantageous for a theorist to abandon her existing framework for the sake of a new one. The analogy with science breaks down, however, with literary theorists who are pluralists, that is, simultaneously adopt several frameworks, choosing between them on a case-by-case basis (p. 204). The analogy breaks down because scientists always work within a single framework (unless they are forced to abandon one framework altogether and replace it by another that is deemed to fare better in the pursuit of truth).

¹⁰ Andy Egan, 'Disputing about Taste', in *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 247–86.

This sketch of the main ideas presented in the volume under review is meant to show that it contains several positions that highlight the specific nature of aesthetic predicates compared to ordinary predicates of personal taste, thus rejecting the subjectivism regarding the semantics of aesthetic predicates. Generally speaking, when one attributes an aesthetic property to an object one is not saying anything about oneself (although by making the attribution one shows their position regarding the object of appreciation). This is not to say, of course, that one does not make the attribution on the basis of certain aesthetic standards that one accepts or takes for granted. The situation with respect to aesthetic predicates is more complicated than the situation with respect to predicates of personal taste. When one utters 'This is tasty', one is thereby semantically implying that one likes the thing under discussion or that one undergoes pleasant gustatory experiences upon eating the thing in question.¹¹ When one utters 'This is beautiful', however, one does not semantically imply that one likes the thing under discussion or that one undergoes pleasant aesthetic experiences upon perceiving the thing in question. (This difference seems to be even more powerful when attributing Sibleyan properties to objects of appreciation.) Based on this difference, one's subjective experiences play a different role when attributing aesthetic properties than when attributing personal taste properties. This line of argumentation lies behind the various challenges collected in the present volume to explicating aesthetic properties in terms of the response-dependent.

I must say that the volume contains well-researched contributions that are in a position to shape further debates both in the philosophy of language and in the philosophy of art. By bringing together philosophers of language and philosophers of art to discuss various topics regarding aesthetic judgements, James Young has succeeded in producing a volume of the utmost interest to a wide audience.

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¹¹ This position is defended in Marián Zouhar, 'Conversations about Taste, Contextualism, and Non-Doxastic Attitudes,' *Philosophical Papers* 47 (2018): 429–60.