# Aesthetic Realism*

*Lloyd Reinhardt*

There is something about aesthetic words, or predications, which is striking. It is, as I shall explain, that it is an abuse of their meaning to pass on, in my own voice, an aesthetic predication communicated to me by another.

Suppose A has just been to the National Gallery in Canberra for an exhibit of paintings. He returns to Sydney, rapt with enthusiasm, and informs me that there are a dozen Cezannes, six Renoirs and three Manets, and much else, in the exhibition. He says that the Renoirs are among his larger canvasses, the Manets from his earliest period, and the Cezannes from the last years of that painter's life; to the information about the Cezannes he adds that he found a few of them repetitive, and others pallid, in contrast to the variety and vivacity of the Renoirs.

A few days later, B tells me she is going to Canberra and asks if I know whether anything special is on at the National Gallery. In my own voice, because I trust A's powers of observation, his memory and his honesty, I say that there is an exhibition which includes Manets, Renoirs and Cezannes. Now, even if I am sure that I would share A's responses, would it not be some sort of abuse of the meaning of 'pallid' and 'vivacious' to pass those words on to B in my own voice, just as I passed on the information about whose works were there and in what numbers?

Even if I have always agreed with A, I would be reluctant to pass on his words (except in direct quotation) as part of my answer to B. Why is this so? It isn't just caution about relying on hearsay. We all know that much of what we know, and readily assert, we have learned from others. I do not tediously preface my remarks about the year of the birth or of the enthroning of Charlemagne by mentioning the encyclopedia or some history book. Well, you might say, I don't even know anymore where I got *that* information. Even so I could always preface what I say with 'I was taught that'; but don't, except where I have become uncertain or wish to allow or tolerate another's uncertainity.

So here is a datum I wish to reflect on. To repeat, we do not, on pain of abusing the standard use of the words, pass on, in our

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own voice, the aesthetic predications of even those we trust. The sugggestion of that is, that to use, in my own voice, such words, is to license others to infer that I have seen the works for myself. The larger implication of my datum is that if Aesthetic Realism were true, this could not be so. I wish to use this lever to pry aesthetic qualities off the world, to locate them in our experience of it. I wish to defend a kind of anti-realism, even an idealism, of a genuinely Berkeleyan sort, about aesthetic qualities and their related predications. For those qualities, to be is to be perceived. It is, of course, a commonplace that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Let me admit at the outset that I am pouring old wine into not very new bottles.

A quotation from Roger Scruton is needed as a qualification on what I shall go on to say; for he brings out the importance of noticing that the category of aesthetic predications is not all of a piece.

> Among these predicates we find a great variety. For example, there are predicates whose primary use is in aesthetic judgement, predicates like 'beautiful', 'graceful', 'elegant' and 'ugly'. These terms occur primarily in judgment of aesthetic value. Then there are descriptions referring to the formal or technical accomplishment of a work of art: 'balanced', 'well-made', 'economical', 'rough', 'undisciplined', and so on. Many aesthetic descriptions employ predicates that are normally used to describe the mental and emotional life of human beings. We describe works of art as sad, joyful, melancholy, agitated, erotic, sincere, vulgar, intelligent and mature ... Aesthetic descriptions can also refer to the expressive features of works of art. Works of art are often said to express emotion, thought, attitude, character, in fact, anything that can be expressed at all ... Closely connected with expression terms are the terms known philosophically as 'affective': terms that seem to be used to express or project particular human responses which they also indicate by name—examples include 'moving', 'exciting', 'evocative', 'nauseous', 'tedious', 'enjoyable' and 'adorable'. We must also include among aesthetic descriptions several kinds of comparison. For example, I may describe a writer's style as bloated or masculine, a colour as warm or cold, a piece of music as architectural ... Finally there are various descriptions of a work of art in terms of what it represents, in terms of its truthfulness, or its overall character or genre (whether it is tragic, comic, ironical or what) which cannot easily be fitted into these classes, but which have an important role, despite this, in aesthetic judgement.[1]

It is the ones Scruton mentions towards the end of that passage that are most problematic for a completely general version of my claim. Often, of course, someone who tells me that there are paintings

1 Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, London, 1974, pp.30f.

of sunflowers in the gallery, or of horses, could have got that information without looking at them, but at the catalogue. And as to whether the play now on at the Seymour is a comedy or a melodrama, we may pass that on in our own voice; but it should be recognized (though such admonition is hardly needed these days) that artists may get up to tricks about those classifications, compelling a viewer or listener into uncertainty about their application, compelling him to recognize that applying such a word is an act of interpretation, more or less contentious. With a lot of modern painting, without benefit of the titles (and even sometimes with that benefit), the issue of what, if anything, is *represented* is itself an issue of interpretation.

Anyway, there are enough examples in Scruton's list of the kind of words that suit my purposes; words such as 'balanced', 'graceful', 'vivid', or, on the negative side, 'garish', 'gaudy'; or, speaking as an admirer of John Austin, 'dainty' and 'dumpy', which he said we would do well to attend to, averting our reflective gaze for a while from the beautiful.

So why is aesthetic realism incompatible with my datum? It is so because it holds that aesthetic predications are predications that are plainly true or false of that of which we predicate them, just as, on a common sense realist view, are the predications of shape, size, colour and number. And such predications as these are unproblematically able to be passed on my own voice, provided I think my source reliable. And the properties correlated with these predications clearly do not depend for their existence on being experienced. I don't think anybody has ever really believed that the roundness of boulders that enables them to roll down hills when dislodged by eathquakes, or their rolling, depends on those boulders ever being seen to be round or to roll.

Not even Berkeley believed that this depended on *us*. The ingenuity of Berkeley's theory is that, if it succeeds, it leaves everything just as our everyday ways of talking say it is. Everything is always being perceived by an omniscient God. According to Berkeley, the difference between opening our eyes and not being able to avoid seeing the shapes and colours before us, and merely imagining such things, remains intact. At least he thinks it does. Whether the will can discharge such a burden of responsibility in the problem of the external world is doubtful. But this is not the place to take up the issue beyond the observations I have made.

I shall later speak of the similarities and differences between aesthetic predications and secondary quality predications, about the difference between, say, 'garish' and 'red'. But first, it is worth

noticing a position different, but ancestral, to mine, which fails to explain the datum we have before us. There once was, indeed still is outside of philosophy, a popular theory about evaluative predication in general, covering both the ethical and the aesthetic; this theory held that such predications do not attribute any properties or qualities to the things they are, apparently, predicated of. Rather they express an emotional response on the part of the speaker. It is then of interest to consider how emotional words behave in relation to the passing on of what others say to you. Here it is useful to focus on indirect quotation instead of on, as we have, the case where I simply pass on, in my own voice, the information given me, but avoid including evaluative predications.

I can, of course, report on A's evaluations by saying, 'A found the Cezannes pallid'. This is to resort to indirect discourse, or indirect quotation as it is also called. And it allows me, without any commitment on my own part to tell another of A's responses to the paintings. But imagine a case where A is contemptuous of Renoir. He says 'I was at the exhibition and I probably would have thoroughly enjoyed myself but for the bloody Renoirs; they are too damned sweet!'. Now, passing on to someone else news of this outburst, I might say, in indirect quotation, that A says the Renoirs are too sweet. But I would not say that A says the bloody Renoirs are just too damned sweet. At least I would not say that unless I shared his willingness to speak of Renoirs as 'bloody' .To speak as I just imagined leaves the word 'bloody' as much, perhaps more, in my mouth as in his. Here, remarkably, even indirect quotation does not relieve *me* of responsibility for a hostile attitude to Renoir's works. With blatantly emotive words, I have to resort to direct quotation, if I do not want to be deemed to share in A's attitude. But I could put his aesthetic predications into indirect quotation. I just cannot take them on as my own words without implying that I have seen the works.

The upshot is that aesthetic predications *contrast* with emotional reactions; and so crude emotivism in aesthetics (and probably in ethics) is not a viable theory. We could put our results so far by saying that aesthetic predications seem to be somewhere in between descriptive, or factual predications, on the one extreme, and emotional responses on the other.

Another symptom of the difference between the evaluative and the emotional is this. An evaluative predication may be challenged by saying 'But is it really garish? Perhaps it is very vivid.' or 'Are you sure it's lively rather than just busy?' It would, on the other hand, be a kind of joke to reply to someone who has just said 'bloody

Keating!', by saying 'But is he really bloody?' We might also notice that there is no problem about putting an evaluative predication in a conditional sentence, as in 'If it's *lovely*, Mary will buy it.' But suppose, having said 'She's lost her way again, damn her!!!'., I come to doubt whether she has lost her way, and shift to '*If* she's lost her way again, damn her!, she'll get no dinner'. The words 'damn her' are not made hypothetical as is the proposition that she has lost her way. There is no way, linguistically or otherwise, to curse conditionally, though we may be confident that, if certain things occur we shall curse.[2]

So where does this leave us concerning aesthetic predications? Keep in mind that I am thinking of aesthetic predications as linguistic (or mental) acts which are constitutive of what is often called an aesthetic response, or more classically, an aesthetic judgment. I hope I have given good reason to say that these predications are not attributions of plain properties to things and that they are also not emotional outbursts occasioned by an encounter with a work of art. But I do not want feeling and emotion to be left out. Feeling and emotion are partly to be understood in terms of their power to incline us to action. In the case of works of art, it is enough for present purposes if we think of this action as limited to praising and condemning (or even ooing, aahing and bahing); though the associated desires to possess, purchase or bestow should be attended to in further reflection. For the willingness just to let the thing be, the absence of desire to possess and to consume, must be an ingredient in aesthetic appreciation. Aesthetic predications share with ethical predications, on most views of these, a non-accidental role in providing reasons for action. Indeed, this has long been the lynchpin of anti-realism or non-cognitivism regarding such predications, or, as we may as well say, such *thoughts*. It is important to say thoughts and not, question beggingly, beliefs. Why question beggingly?

Explaining this will bring out further what is at stake between realism and anti-realism. Ever since Hume, it has been widely held, though certainly not universally, that mere beliefs as to what is so cannot, of themselves, move us to action. The gist of the view I have been presenting in terms of whether or not our predications are attributions of independent properties can also be put in terms of whether the thoughts involved are to be classified as beliefs. This formulation presupposes, what can itself be made controversial

2 Bernard Williams, 'Morality and Emotion', in *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, 1973, p.207.

(though only to obscurantist effect), that beliefs are true or false.

In other words, the question, Do aesthetic predications represent independently existing properties or qualities or relations?, and the question, Are aesthetic thoughts beliefs?, are two ways of attending to the same problem. The two ways of raising our problem lead in two different directions. There is not time here to follow them both. But let me sketch the second briefly before taking the first some of the way.

The way of belief or not belief is best followed in terms of truth, by asking whether aesthetic judgments are such as to enjoy, or seek to enjoy, all or some significant portion of, what assertions, expressions of belief, seek to enjoy. David Wiggins[3] has done the best job yet of saying what that is. Following Gottlob Frege, Wiggins maintains that we cannot really define truth, that it is one of our primitive notions, indispensable to thought. He then proceeds to elucidate what he calls plain truth by speaking of the marks of truth; and these are several. First, plain truth is what assertions normally strive to enjoy; second, plain truth will yield convergence on the judgment that P, for any inquirers pursing knowledge of the relevant matter. Third, plain truth is always truth in virtue of something independent of judgment itself (call this the requirement that saying or thinking doesn't make it so). A related mark is that explanation of convergence on some P will demand of the explainer a plain assertion that P, with full commitment to P on his part. E.g., part of why any reader of this page will believe that there are more than ten words on this page is that there *are* more than ten; or part of why we all believe that 7 + 5 = 12 is that there is nothing else for it when you add 7 and 5 but to get 12. As Wiggins puts it, there is nothing else to say on the matter as witnessed by the fact that if you try to deny it, it can be demonstrated that you will eventually have to contradict yourself. And the final mark of plain truth is that if P has it and Q has it, then conjunction P and Q also has it. All truths, to put that another way, are consistent with each other and the acquisition and elaboration of our beliefs is constrained, inter- and intra-personally, by this demand, the demand for consistency among all truths.

The investigation in terms of truth, then, will be one in which we work through these marks in relation to various kinds of aesthetic thoughts or judgments, and remark the extent to which they come up to this standard of plain truth, taking care to notice how they fail and

3 David Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', Henrietta Hertz Memorial Lecture, British Academy, 1976.

where and to what extent, etc. This descriptive enterprise will also reward us as to what the role of truth is in our lives, as well as reward us concerning the position of aesthetic discussion in our lives. Doing it well and fully will relieve the philosophical cramps that ancient puzzles generate. We shall, as Wittgenstein urged us to try to do, get a perspicuous view of the territory and, we hope, be able to stop philosophizing about it and live in it. This does not mean that those who live happily in it now, without philosophy, are commiting intellectual misdemeanors. Philosophy is not everyone's cup of tea.

So that is the way of truth in relation to our problem. Let me now take the other avenue of inquiry, the one via predications and properties. I want to suggest that aesthetic predications are best understood as what, following Wittgenstein again, I shall call the *dawning of aspects*. Another way to say that is to say that they are cases of seeing *as*, not cases of seeing *that*.

So consider the duck-rabbit. There are many such figures. You can see an ambiguous figure either way, and more or less at will. When you have trouble, steps can be taken by a helper. Think of a walk on a lightly cloudy day when your companion, looking up, says there is a face in the cloud. You can't see it. You get some help with talk of noses and chins, and then it dawns on you. It is very important, that the words 'See it as ...', but not words 'See that it is ... ' are naturally and intelligibly used in the imperative mood. This linguistic tip sits on a metaphysical iceberg, hinting at the role of the will, and so of practical reason, in aesthetic judgment. My thesis, stated baldly, is that an aesthetic response or judgment is the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning. To reach such a judgment is properly to be compared with reaching a decision as to how to act or, more relevantly, reaching a state of knowing what to feel on a matter. It is easy to forget, because of bad philosophy of mind and bad psychology, that there is such a thing as knowing what, or how, to feel. The bad philosophy of mind and the bad psychology consist in treating emotions and feelings on the model of sensations. Anger on these views is like being in pain, or being tickled or getting a stomach ache; it just happens willynilly. But we can educate our feelings, develop them, improve our sensibility or let it degenerate. I am not pretending that I have sufficiently argued for this claim about practical reason.[4]

4 Scruton, op. cit; makes important use of Wittgenstein's observations about seeing as in his discussions in this book and elsewhere in defending the role of practical reason in aesthetic judgment.

So the case I ask you to compare aesthetic response with (or recognize as itself an instance of) is that of a moment when you say 'Now it's a duck!'. Call this the dawning of an aspect. My thesis, put again baldly, is that aspects are Berkeleyan, for them *esse* is *percipi*, *to be is to be perceived*. They are only there as the content of an experience. The drawing, of course, has all sorts of properties, such as being composed of chalk against a green background, deviating from circularity and the like. Those, in sharp contrast to its aspects, it has whether anybody notices them or not. Someone could see the chalk spread out there and not see that it is chalk that is spread out there, thinking that it is paint or having no idea what it is; just so, I saw a lot of LBWs in cricket before I acquired the understanding I needed to identify them. Properties and relations are like that, not Berkeleyan. What would we make of someone who had never acquired the concept of a duck, never seen anything like one, was then taught about ducks, and said that the duck aspect had once dawned on him? I would find that utterly mystifying.

Let me now make a comparison of aspects with what traditionally have been called secondary qualities. Consider colour. On the view of colour hinted at by Democritus and taken further by Galileo and John Locke, red is not really a property of ripe tomatoes or of certain parts of the Australian flag. Red belongs, as Galileo put it, to the sensitive body. Locke, misleadingly, said it was a property of the mind.

Without worrying about that difference any further, let me say what is involved according to the contemporary discussion of this issue. Initially, and I think finally, the most plausible view of what red is, or what *redness* is if you like, is that 'A is red' must mean 'A looks red to normal perceivers in standard circumstances'. Of course, it could also be *defined*, as it is in physics, as the colour of longest wave length. There is nothing wrong with that as a definition, unless there is because the physics is wrong. But it is not what analytic philosophy, in its heyday, would have called an *analysis*. An analysis is a definition which takes apart the concept in such a way as to elucidate what our understanding of the word 'red' amounts to when we are competent users of the word. The problem with the physical definition as an *analysis* is that most competent users of the word 'red' know nothing about physics. They do know that being red has to do with how things, most things anyway, look at noon on a lightly overcast day. And they know that if ripe tomatoes look other than red to someone, or if stop signs do, then that person is abnormal in some way, not a normally sighted perceiver.

This is a controversial position these days. (And I don't mean

because it is akin to racism or sexism to call the colour blind abnormal). There is an issue I will sketch. If looking red (*to normal perceivers in standard conditions*, a clause I will take for granted henceforth) is internal to the analysis of 'red', that means that it is a necessary truth that red things normally look red. The opposing view is that looking red is a contingent property which assists creatures like us in fixing on what, in independent reality, the predication 'is red' refers to. Just as 'current PM of A' might help a visitor to fix on the bearer of the name 'Bob Hawke'. We certainly would not conclude from the helpfulness of that bit of information that Bob Hawke's being PM of Australia is a necessary rather than contingent truth that Hawke is Prime Minister. Obviously, you can, as it is nowadays put, fix the reference of many terms, including names and predicates, by mentioning contingencies, ways things are that could have been otherwise.

If you hold this reference fixation view, you will regard our visual capacity, our optical wiring if you like, as a detector of independently existing properties of tomatoes and parts of Australian flags, just as we regard our eyes and other senses as detectors of the primary properties of things, their shapes, sizes, motions and locations. The traditional view of these primary properties is that they can be defined or analysed in terms of, the relations of shapes, sizes and motions and locations to each other without talk of perceivers. The supporter of Democritus will say, it is only a contingent truth about primary qualities and us that they look as they do to us. So even if all our optical wiring went wrong and billiard balls looked like large eggs, the spherical and the ovoid would remain untouched. But how they are for us involves a necessary truth when the secondary qualities are at issue.

My point in bringing all this up is to focus on that part of the analysis of 'is red' which speaks of normal perceivers in standard conditions. Now what that normalcy comes to can, with the aid of natural science, be spelled out without ever using the predicate 'is red'. Nothing in my optical nervous system is red and what it is for it to be healthy and normal, will probably be explained by a more developed science of the human brain.

Now the contrast I want to remark between aesthetic sensibility and colour sightedness lies just in that point about normal perceivers. I am willing to accept that the community of receivers, as we might say, of the aesthetic qualities of things, is entitled to downgrade the responses of some people by saying they lack suitable sensibilities or, as we say, taste. It is right to speak of a community here for this

reason. If we are to have a distinction between 'I like it' and 'it's good', ('I like it' is a kind of *retreat*) we need a notion of a consensus to speak of the issue of convergence in aesthetic judgment. Here is the link between my two different ways of investigating this problem. As Hume saw clearly, a judgment of taste is more than an avowal of like or dislike. It goes beyond an avowal of liking by appealing to some kind of consensus or community of the tasteful. It is here, by the way, that aesthetic judgment is in the most trouble with respect to the sharing of the marks of plain truth. For it is problematic whether the explanation of consensus will require the explainer himself to avow the aesthetic response involved. But let us neglect that problem to get to my immediate one, the contrast with colour.

We say that the normalcy condition for perceiving red does not itself include, as a subcondition, that anything actually be red. Indeed, the characterization and explanation of this condition had better not include being red, on pain of vicious circularity. But the taste of people is a central case of something to which we apply, whether we agree about it or not, aesthetic predications. Just so, people's responsiveness to ethical features of actions and circumstances, is of the utmost interest to us as itself one of the bearers of ethical qualities, one of the subjects of ethical predicates. We call it the character of people. But the aesthetic, even more, I reckon, than the ethical, is bound up with our being what we are because of our history and because of the social and cultural artifact that we inhabit.

There may be some basic ingredients in our ethical and even our aesthetic sensibility which utopian sociobiology will someday spell out for us. There is not, I think, any *a priori* way to rule that out; nor should we want to rule it out. It will have to make its own way as a plausible explanatory theory, like any other. Short of that, we speak of such things as what matters to people, what they care about, what is important to them, when we engage in explaining why they have these and those virtues and vices, and why they have this or that kind of taste. To speak of such things is to speak of values. And, as I have implied, these, possibly even centrally, are themselves the things of which we make ethical and aesthetic predications. It is even plausible to hold that motives are the *primary* bearers of good and bad, the central items to which our ethical vocabulary applies. This is not as initially plausible for aesthetic predications. What makes for generous action is crucially tied to the presence of a certain kind of motive and the action and the motive are both called generous. The motive lying behind the production of beauty need not obviously be beautiful. I will conclude with a thought of Simone Weil's about that.

Leading up to that, I would call attention to words that are simultaneously ethical and aesthetic, words such as 'sentimental', 'graceful', 'morbid', 'horrid', 'stodgy', 'creepy', 'vile'. Some there are, and I am one of them (without enough argument for it) who are tempted by Wittgenstein's dictum that the ethical and the aesthetic are one. What prevents me from giving in to the temptation without more reflection is the troublesome fact that there are bad people with good taste. Even Simone Weil, perhaps our century's most ardent Platonist, feared that the good and the beautiful, two of Plato's trinity of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, had come apart. She wrote, in a notebook: 'Every great artist, at least in his moments of finest conception, shows himself to be an authentic lover of the good'. But there follow parenthesis: 'possible exception Rimbaud'. It counts at once for and against aesthetic realism, that it can so readily respond to this troubled acknowledgment by Weil, by just saying without further ado, that she has plainly refuted herself.

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## cracking nuts

I crack a nut
& the ovoid berry is
broken cruelly
so too the husk of in vivo passion
&
spurious sensibility
making a meal
of light

Leith Morton