Aesthetic tropism

On Aesthetic Properties conference

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Introduction

- The literature on aesthetic properties (AP) focused on issues such as the reality of AP, their relation to non-aesthetic properties, their role in aesthetic judgement, whether and how we may perceive them, among other things.

- I want to consider a different issue, which has almost never been discussed: that of knowing **which theory of properties realists about AP ought to accept**.

- = *Which metaphysics of properties should be favored by aesthetic realists ?*

Introduction

A heated metaphysical dispute:

(1) Some take properties to be *non-particular*, insofar as they are repeatable. Whiteness, e.g., would be identically present in all white things. That would make it a multiply located entity.

(2) For others, properties are *particular*. Each white thing has its own numerically distinct whiteness, which is unrepeatable and uniquely located

(1) = (immanent) **universals** → "**universalism**"
(2) = **tropes** ('modes', 'abstract particulars') → "**tropism**"

Introduction

We may adopt either tropism or universalism in the particular case of AP:

- **Aesthetic Universalism (AU):** AP are universals (i.e. non particular entities, repeatable, multiply located)

- **Aesthetic Tropism (AT):** AP are tropes (i.e. particular entities, unrepeatable, uniquely located)

- My claim: AT is preferable to AU, for several reasons

Introduction

- For the purposes of this talk, I will admit that:

  - i) there are properties, and that there are real AP (against austere nominalism and AP antirealism).

  - ii) we have an intuitive grasp of the distinction between AP and non-AP

  - iii) AU and AT are compatible with familiar claims about AP: e.g. *response-dependence, supervenience,* partial dependence upon artistic categories in use

  - iv) AT or AU are metaphysically 'ex aequo' (= ignore purely metaphysical reasons to prefer on or the other view).

- So, my claim is highly conditional: *if* there are real AP, aesthetic tropism is *ceteris paribus* preferable to aesthetic universalism

Outline

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AU vs AT

- For AU, elegant things literally have something in common: an elegance universal

  - The *very same* elegance universal exists in several locations at the same time e.g. in this vase, this ballet, …
  - There's something like elegance 'in general', shared by all elegant things

- For AT, there is not elegance universal, but *individual* elegances:

  - The elegance of this particular vase is unique, as it numerically differs from any other actual or possible elegance.
  - Each elegant thing is elegant in its own way, numerically speaking.

AP realists must choose

- Realists about AP must opt either for AU or AT – this is not an optional demand for times of metaphysical daydreaming

- Assuming AP realism, and given that everything is either particular or non-particular, AP are either particular or non particular. So: if there are real AP, they must be tropes or universals.

    - Note: some admit both universals *and* tropes – see e.g. Lowe (2005).
    - A "hybrid" theory of AP is possible . But I see no reason to endorse this view, which is less systematic/attractive than 'pure' AP or AU.

The Supercopier

- We might think that the easiest way to decide between AU and AT is to consider familiar scenarios involving numerically distinct but visually indiscernible artworks (see e.g. Danto 1981, Walton 1970, Currie 1989).

- Imagine a Supercopier that can replicate objects at the atomic level. *Mona Lisa* goes in, a perfect "supercopy" is generated

- The question is: *will Mona Lisa and supercopy have the same AP*?
  - If we answer 'yes', our intuitions support AU
  - If we answer 'no' they support AT

Two different questions

Note: "having the same aesthetic properties" is ambiguous

- "Same" can be understood *qualitatively*
    - = **The A-question**: do *Mona Lisa* and the supercopy have the same aesthetic property-types?
    - Are their AP *qualitatively* identical ?

- "Same" can understood *numerically*
    - = **The B-question**: if *Mona Lisa* and the supercopy are both elegant, do we have two distinct elegances?
    - Are their AP *numerically* identical?

Supercopier: a tie break?

- **A-question:** intuitively, *Mona Lisa* and supercopy have the same AP, qualitatively speaking.

  - But this does not mean that AU is right, for AT can account for property-types in terms of classes of (exactly) resembling tropes.

- **B-question:** multilocation is what's most counterintuitive about AU, so it seems more plausible to think that the AP here are numerically distinct.

  - But this does not mean that AT is right, for AU can still say that there are numerically distinct *instances* of elegance here.

→ So, tie break: our intuitions do not directly support AT or AU in duplication scenarios

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The argument from historical properties

▪ Some might point out that I have forgotten something important in my discussion of Supercopier: *Mona Lisa* has (historical, contextual, intentional) properties that even a perfect supercopy couldn't have.

▪ Recall Walton (1970): perfect intrinsic duplicates could differ in terms of AP.

▪ However, this says nothing to support AT or AU!

→ The historical, contextual, or intentional properties of *Mona Lisa* could just as well be tropes or universals!

The argument from historical properties

- Couldn't we say that some of *Mona Lisa*'s historical and aesthetically relevant properties must be **tropes**?

- Take P = *produced by Leonardo da Vinci at this moment, this location, in such manner.* Sufficiently specified, P will be unrepeatable and non shareable. Some might think that this makes P a trope.

- We'd have an argument for AT along these lines:
    - (1) *Mona Lisa* has P, supercopy doesn't
    - (2) *Mona Lisa's* aesthetic properties partially depend on P
    - (3) We can't account for P without tropes

    _____

    AT is more adequate than AU to account for aesthetic properties

Replies

- 1. Even assuming that P is a trope, this does not show that *all* AP are tropes, as AT wants. So this is a best a case for tropism, not for AT.

- 2. P is a complex (conjunctive) property, so complex that it is unrepeatable. But each conjunct might still be a universal. This clearly does not sit well with AT.

- 3. AU could maintain that P is a uniquely instantiated universal.

→ The argument from historical properties fails

The argument from uniqueness

- Some take artworks to be ontologically "unique", i.e. unrepeatable and non-substitutable
  - Nanay (2016: 119-121): arguments for this view are unpersuasive.

- Still, doesn't AT shed a new light on ontological uniqueness?
  - For AT, each artwork is unique or non-substitutable, as its properties are numerically distinct from those of any other thing.
  - By contrast, AU sees artworks as patchworks of repeatable (non-unique, substitutable) properties.

- As long as we accept the uniqueness thesis, isn't this a reason to favor AT?

Reply

- Not really: AT secures ontological uniqueness, but this has nothing to do with the nature of artworks!

- According to AT, *every* property of *any* object is unique:
  - *Mona Lisa* is unique, for its properties are; but the same goes for the banana I ate yesterday, or for a bunch of iPhones on a production line!

→ AT trivializes the claim: *everything* is unique! That's not what proponents on ontological uniqueness wanted to say.

The argument from particularity

- The case could be made that AT fits better our (particularist) intuitions about artworks.

- Assume that the Pietà is elegant. AU will say that:

  - the Pietà is partially identical to all elegant things (whatever they may be), insofar as a universal is identically present in its instances.

  - the Pietà's elegance isn't a *special* elegance: it's just an instance of elegance, identically present in all other elegant things

  - the Pietà is a combination of properties identically found elsewhere

The argument from particularity

- This sounds wrong!

- AU conflicts with the intuitive notion that the Pietà's properties are unique, irreplaceable, or special.

- What is valuable or unique about the Pietà isn't merely that it is elegant, but *the particular way in which it is elegant*; a way which we assume to be non repeatable and non transferable.

- If so, AT fits better with common intuitions about artworks

The argument from particularity

We do indeed, in talking about a work of art, concern ourselves with its individual and specific features. We say that it is delicate not simply because it is in pale colors but because of *those* pale colors, that it is graceful not because its outline curves slightly but because of *that* particular curve. We use expressions like "because of *its* pale coloring", (…) "because of *the* way the lines converge" where it is clear we are referring not to the presence of general features but to very specific and particular ones (Sibley 1959 : 434)

▪ This seems in line with AT. However, Sibley is ambiguous: a *specific* property isn't necessarily *particular*!

The argument from particularity

- Particularist intuitions?

"When I focus on the tones of the Mona Lisa, I am not thinking of anything general, but of those very tones on that very canvas" (Loux 2006: 74)

"When you draw attention to some feature on account of which terms of aesthetic evaluation may be bestowed, you draw attention, not to a property which different individual works of art may share, but to a part or aspect of an individual work of art" (Strawson 1974 : 186 ; quoted by Nanay 2016: 125)

The argument from particularity

- If we agree that our intuitions are particularist, we could get the following argument for AT:

    - (1) We think that the properties of artworks are particular
    - (2) For AU, the properties of artworks are general
    - (3) For AT, the properties of artworks are particular

    _____

    - AT, not AU, fits our intuitions about the properties of artworks

Reply 1: elegance *qua*?

- AU could reply that although the Pietà's elegance is the same elegance as that of any other elegant thing, what we value is *elegance qua instantiated by the Pietà*

- But the strategy fails: this qua-thing isn't a universal at all, because it could not be repeated or shared with anything else. It is a trope!
  - Note : might be also a fact or state of affairs, but I'll leave that aside

- What matters is that AU cannot introduce properties *qua* instantiated by particulars without countenancing other things over and above universals.

Reply 2: the pattern, not the constituents

- AU could suggest that what is valuable and unique with the Pietà is not its *special elegance,* but its *special manner of producing elegance.*

- The particularity of the Pietà could be due to a ***particular combination of non-particular properties***.
  - = What's special or irreplaceable is the way the properties are arranged, not the properties *themselves.*

→ So, even if we have particularist intuitions, this does suffice to show that AT is correct. AU can also account for these intuitions in terms of universals.

The argument from testimony

- A much discussed issue is to know if we can know AP on a testimonial basis. Most think that we can't: see Wolheim's acquaintance principle (1980).

- Réhaut: AT provides "a simple metaphysical explanation for the acquaintance principle" (2013: 218)

- The idea seems to be this: if AP are tropes, the only way to know *this* elegance is to get perceptually acquainted with it, insofar as it is numerically unique

The argument from testimony

▪ By contrast:

> If aesthetic properties were universals (…), having seen a beautiful thing once would be enough to know what another beautiful thing will be like. In other words, after an initial acquaintance with a beautiful thing, we wouldn't need to experience other beautiful things to know that they are so. It'd be enough to be told that a thing is beautiful in order to get the knowledge that it is (…) Trope theory fits better our intuition that direct experience is fundamental in aesthetics (Réhaut 2013: 218)

▪ Overall, Réhaut suggests that AU would be committed to deny the acquaintance principle, while AT would be naturally compatible with it. As long as we accept the acquaintance principle, this is an argument for AT.

Reply 1: testimonial knowledge!

- AT shouldn't accept that we can only know tropes through perceptual acquaintance, for this will imply that we can't even know the *non-aesthetic properties* of things on a testimonial basis!

  - We couldn't know, e.g., that *Mona Lisa* has such size, or that it represents a woman, on the sole basis of testimony.

- More generally, testimonial knowledge wouldn't be possible. This is implausible (and way too costly of a consequence!)

Reply 2: AP perception isn't atomistic

- For Réhaut, AU leads to quietism: if you've seen all AP once in your life, you won't need new aesthetic experiences. No need to go to the museum any longer!

- But AU can reply that it is not elegance itself that matters to us. Instead, it is *the particular way* in which elegance is produced

- Réhaut's point would hold if we experienced AP atomistically. But this isn't so. AP are perceived holistically, as being tied with other properties.

→ So, the objection fails.

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The argument from destruction

- Immanent universals ontologically depend on the particulars which instantiate them.
  - No roundness universal without round things

- Universals *generically* depend on their instances:
  - F-ness exists as long as a F-thing (whatever it is) exists

- Tropes *rigidly* depend upon their bearers
  - = *That* redness trope couldn't exist without *this* tomato (Lowe 2006: 27)

The argument from destruction

- Consequence: for AU, it might not matter much if we destroyed the *Pietà*!

  - If they are universals, the *Pietà's* properties are instantiated elsewhere by other things, and keep existing identically after the Pietà is destroyed.

  - For AU, there's no less *elegance* in the world if we destroy the *Pietà*, as the very same elegance is instantiated elsewhere by other things.

- By contrast, AT explains the loss: the Pietà's particular and irreplaceable properties would be destroyed.

→ AT can explain why destroying the Pietà would be bad, AU can't.

Reply 1: focus on the pattern?

- AU could reply that it too can account for the loss:
  "what's destroyed is the *particular combination of properties* of the Pietà; not its properties individually taken!"

- However, this too violates our intuitions: if we built a perfect replica of the Pietà after its destruction, AU should stay content, for we retrieve the pattern of properties than had been lost!

- This seems wrong : something has been lost *despite* the perfect replica!

Reply 2 : historical properties?

- AU could turn towards historical properties: what is valuable in the Pietà is a bundle which includes historical (contextual, intentional) properties.

  - No replica, however perfect, could have *these* properties.

- So, AU could explain why the Pietà's destruction would be a loss even if we built a perfect replica afterwards.

- But this strategy fails, as shows the following scenario of 'The Two Pietàs'

The two Pietàs

- Suppose that there are in fact *two* Pietàs:
  - we discover that Michelangelo has produced two visually indiscernible Pietàs at the same time, from the same type of materials, etc.

- There's the Pietà in the Vatican that we know, and another buried in a cave under the Vatican.

  - Call these **V-Pietà** and **C-Pietà**, respectively

- Now, imagine this: V-Pietà is destroyed. Soon after, we discover C-Pietà.

The argument from destruction

- AU must say that the discovery of C-Pietà **compensates** the loss caused by the destruction of V-Pietà, as it's the same bundle of formal & historical properties in both cases!

- This seems wrong. The destruction of V-Pietà is an invaluable loss, *even* **if there should be such a thing as C-Pietà!**

- AT can account for this: even if we discovered C-Pietà, *the properties of V-Pietà are gone forever*!

→ So, what we value is not merely a particular combination of non-particular properties. It is rather the particular properties themselves!

The perceptual argument

- Some argue for tropes on perceptual grounds (e.g. Williams 1953, Campbell 1981, Lowe 1998, Nanay 2012, 2016).

   Whoever wishes to reject [tropes] must (…) claim that we see not just *independent things per se*, but also *things as falling under certain concepts* or *as exemplifying certain universals*. (…) But the friend of [tropes] finds this counterintuitive (Mulligan, Simons, & Smith 1984: 306)

- There's a way to make this criticism stronger: I suggest that AU cannot account for the **co-discernability** of AP and non-aesthetic properties.

The perceptual argument

Just as a rich red is not just a rich colour and red, so too a line is not just curved in a certain way and graceful, nor are the words of a poem put together just so and also moving; the curvature is a graceful curvature, the combination of words a moving one. (…) They have to be co-discernible. One sees the grace in that particular curve, sees the particular curve as a graceful one (Sibley 1974 : 17)

Co-discernibility = you can't perceive AP without perceiving non-aesthetic properties as well and at the same time

The perceptual argument

- AT accounts for co-discernibility: the elegance of this curve is an elegance trope rigidly depending on a curve trope.
  - You can't see the former without seeing the latter.

- But for AU, perceiving a graceful curve amounts to perceiving: (i) the particular as having a curve universal AND (ii) the particular has having a grace universal

- But we don't see the curvature *and* the grace separately!

→ AT can account for co-discernibility, AU cannot. If so, AT is better suited to account for the perception of AP.

The perceptual argument from destruction

- Imagine someone throws paint remover on the Mona Lisa.

- AT says that we'd see particular properties ceasing to exist (Lowe 1998: 205), which is why we would be mortified.

- AU cannot say anything as simple. The particular does not cease to exist. The relevant universals and the relation of instantiation either.

- So, AU has to say that what ceased to exist is *the particular instantiation relation between this particular and these properties,* and that this is what upsets us.

The perceptual argument from destruction

- However, a particular instantiation relation between properties and a particular is nothing else but a **state of affairs** (in Armstrong's sense).

- So, AU will have to augment their ontology with facts/states of affairs to account for the case at hand.

→ AT has a simple explanation for the foregoing situation, but AU cannot account for it with the sole resource of universals. This is a general advantage of AT over (pure) AU.

The semantic argument

- Some expressions seem to directly refer to tropes : "Mary's kindness", "this pigment's redness", …

- Apparent reference to tropes is common in aesthetic contexts, e.g. when we speak of 'the shape of the Mona Lisa's mouth, or the way Ingrid Bergman asked Sam to play 'As Time Goes By' in *Casablanca'* (Simons 1994: 556).

- We could argue that reference to trope is pervasive and indispensable in common discourse about artworks.

- Isn't this a consideration in favor of tropes?

The semantic argument

- Universalists will reply:

  (a) that cases of apparent reference to tropes are counterbalanced by cases of apparent reference to property-types, which tropism can't account for.

  (b) that any statement which seems to refer to tropes can be rephrased in terms of universals.

- But (a) and (b) are arguably false.

The semantic argument

- Trope theory *can* account for statements referring to property types, as the latter can be construed as classes of (exactly) resembling tropes.

  - « There is a distinctive melancholy in each of Hopper's paintings »

  = There a class C of exactly resembling melancholy tropes, and each Hopper painting has a trope belonging to that class.

- This generalizes easily. So, AT can account for cases where we want to refer to general property-types without countenancing universals.

The semantic argument

- AU could reply that it can accommodate statements apparently referring to tropes, so that AT has no advantage here.

- A possible strategy:
  - "this greenness in the lower left corner of Cézanne's *L'Estaque*"
  - = a greenness universal *qua* instantiated in the lower left corner of *L'Estaque*

- But a property *qua instantiated* by a particular is no universal at all! It's a trope (or a state of affairs). If so, AU will have to admit tropes, or states of affairs. This less attractive than pure trope theory.

The semantic argument

- (1) AT an account for sentences apparently referring to particularized properties, and for sentences apparently referring to property types

- (2) AU cannot account for sentences apparently referring to particularized properties solely with universals.

- (3) Both types of sentences play an important role in criticism and ordinary discourse about art.

→ AT is preferable to tropism on semantic grounds

Conclusion

- I've surveyed several potential arguments for AT –there would be others yet to discuss.

- Some of these arguments, though intuitive at first glance, can receive straightforward answers from AU. I take others to be more successful.

→ So: AP realists ought to accept AT rather than AU.

→ If you think that trope theory and universalism are ex-aequo in other disputes, this is more generally a reason to favor tropes over universals.