Understanding Beauty
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Abstract. For various reasons, we often want to understand what makes a work of art beautiful, but in what sense is this possible, and to what extent? I argue there are important limitations on the kind of understanding we can have of a work’s beauty. I frame the discussion with a distinction from the literature on scientific understanding, between understanding that and understanding why. I argue, in these terms, that we can understand that something is beautiful, but not understand why it is. My argument is based on a proposal I make about what is required for understanding why something is pleasurable, as well as a somewhat restricted version of the claim that there are no general rules for aesthetic evaluation. Along the way, I discuss the relationship between my conclusion and Kant’s claim that there are no rules of taste.

What kind of understanding can we have of something’s beauty? I listen to the first movement of Beethoven’s op. 109. I listen to the album S/W by electronic duo Second Woman. I am captivated, and I want to understand what makes each piece of music so captivating. What is it about the opening bars in the Beethoven? Is it the broken chords? What about S/W? Is it the continuous changes in tempo, the appearance and disappearance of meter? I might seek such understanding for various different reasons. I am curious, or I write music and want to understand more about valuable work when I hear it. The questions are also important for critical discussion. I might want to understand what makes the music captivating so I can help others appreciate it, challenge those who aren’t similarly moved.

And it seems like I can succeed. When I fix on the broken chords at the beginning of the Beethoven and judge that the music is beautiful, in part, because of them, it seems like I am understanding something about what makes the music beautiful. For some philosophers, the possibility of such understanding is certain enough to serve as the starting point for further argument. But in what sense am I understanding what makes the Beethoven beautiful? Are there limits to how far I can go?

The line of questioning touches on several different issues. To work my way into them, and to foreground the question I want to pursue in what follows, I will make a few uncontroversial assumptions. I will limit my discussion to beauty. What I have to say will apply to understanding other aesthetic values, as well, but it simplifies discussion to narrow my focus. I will also assume that we ascribe beauty to objects, or, equivalently, judge they are beautiful, on the basis of a distinctive kind of pleasure we take in them. That pleasure is different from the kind we take in a delicious piece of chocolate, or in watching a skilled carpenter put together a table. I will call the distinctive pleasure we take in something when we ascribe beauty to it aesthetic pleasure. This doesn’t necessarily mean, e.g., disinterested

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pleasure, in Kant’s sense, though the argument is not affected by thinking of it this way. In these terms, my ascribing beauty to S/W or the first movement of op. 109 is, in part, a matter of my feeling aesthetic pleasure when I engage with the music, when I listen attentively.

With these assumptions in place, many of the thoughts above can be posed in more precise, tractable forms. To wonder about what makes something beautiful is really to wonder about what makes it pleasurable in the particular way it is. My question, then, is how far we can go in understanding that fact. How far can we go in understanding what about an object makes it a source of aesthetic pleasure? Since being beautiful, on my assumptions, is a matter of being found to be a source of aesthetic pleasure, this is as much to ask: how far can we go in understanding what about an object makes it beautiful?

Not every philosopher would think it is useful to pursue the questions. Kant, for example, warned against doing so in the Critique of the Power of Judgment. Anyone concerned with judgments about beauty, he said, should be concerned only with ‘the faculties of cognition and their functions in these judgments’—what the mind is doing when it engages with something found to be beautiful; this is ‘what critics can and should reason about’ (5:286). We should only try to understand the nature of our response to beauty, in other words, not the properties of the object by virtue of which it is such as to elicit that response.

Kant had his reasons for thinking as much, but those engage with some of the more difficult parts of his theory of beauty. They engage with his idea that, while objects of beauty seem as if designed to elicit aesthetic pleasure from us, we can’t conceive the design. We can’t, more precisely, conceive of the object’s design as something drawn up for that purpose, cannot grasp how the goal of eliciting aesthetic pleasure could have lead, by thinking of whatever kind, to this particular configuration of sensible properties. There is no sense, then, in looking to objective properties to understand anything about what makes something beautiful.

The reasons are difficult, as I said, but the conclusion they support is plausible. It is plausible that there are important limitations on the understanding we can have of something’s beauty, limits, that is, on how far we can understand what it is about an object that makes it such as to elicit aesthetic pleasure. It would be desirable to have some way of articulating those limits, of supporting Kant’s conclusion, that relied a more manageable set of concepts.

In what follows, I want to provide one. I will give my own argument in support of the claim that there are limits to how far we can go in understanding something’s beauty. I will frame the argument in terms of a distinction from the literature on scientific understanding, between understanding that and understanding why. I will argue that we can understand that something is beautiful, but not understand why it is. My argument will be based on a proposal about what it is to understand why something is pleasurable, as well as a somewhat restricted version of the claim that

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there are no general rules for aesthetic evaluation. I defend both when the time comes.

Though my argument is not based on Kantian considerations, the conclusion, as I said, is one Kant would have accepted. At the end, I briefly return to Kant to see why this is so. I do so because the form of his explanation is worth keeping in mind. For Kant, the conclusion is true given the nature of the mental activity by virtue of which we experience beauty, rather than anything so abstract as, for instance, general principles about the generality or particular aesthetic evaluation.

1 Improving Understanding

Can we understand what makes something beautiful? It is clear enough that we can make some progress.

Suppose I’m thinking about the first movement of the Beethoven. I can explain to myself some of the things in the piece I take myself to be pleased by. I think about the simplicity of the broken chords in the introduction; I think about the extremely wide spacing in the voices both at the beginning and later in the movement; I think about the abrupt change of mood and tempo in the second theme, after the first was around for only 8 bars. This seems to reflect some understanding of the music’s beauty.

Not only can I explain these things to myself, but I can also explain them to others, and in doing so help them appreciate the piece. The description like the one above can help them direct their attention to what are (in my view) important aspects of the music, aspects attention to which will produce a response. You might never have noticed the wide spacing as such before, and now that you do it begins to grow on you, exercising a stronger and stronger influence over the feelings you have when you listen to the music. The extent to which I am able to help you this way this confirms me in thinking I understand something about what makes the music beautiful. Conversation about this type of understanding is at the heart of critical discourse.³

A third reason to think I understand what makes the music beautiful is that, in articulating my pleasure, I get better at discerning beauty in music of the same general kind—music from the 19th century, music written for solo piano. This is related to a point that Hume made. Where matters of taste are concerned, he said, ‘nothing tends further to increase and improve this talent [for discerning beauty], than practice in a particular art, and the frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty’.⁴ When I get better at discerning beauty in a particular art, like music, it is plausible I improve my understanding of what makes individual pieces of music beautiful, and this includes the Beethoven. I articulate the pleasure

I take in the piece; I get better at discerning beauty in music of its kind; my understanding of that species of beauty, including as it appears in the Beethoven, is improved.

There are three considerations, then, that suggest it’s possible to make progress in understanding what makes something beautiful. I can articulate the source of my aesthetic pleasure in terms of properties of the work. That very articulation can help others appreciate beauty in the object. More generally, I can get better at discerning beauty in work of a particular kind, such as in music rather than sculpture, for example. This suggests I can understand something about what makes music beautiful, and because my capacity to discern beauty can show improvement. What could be the problem?

The problem, I suggest, is overstatement. It is true that I am have some kind of understanding in each of the three cases, but there is another kind of understand I lack. To explain both more precisely, the terms of the argument need to be refined.

2 Understanding Why

Start with a distinction from the literature on scientific understanding, between two kinds of understanding: understanding that and understanding why. I might understand that there is water boiling on the stove. I see the boiling water clearly with my own two eyes. I might also understand why there is water boiling on the stove: my brother is about to make some pasta. Understanding that is a matter of grasping propositions, or that some state of affairs obtains. Understanding why is a matter of grasping an argument for those propositions, or an explanation that identifies sufficient causes for the obtaining of that state of affairs.

The distinction applies naturally to cases of understanding beauty. When I listen to the first movement of the Beethoven and take aesthetic pleasure in it, ascribing beauty to it, I come to understand that the movement is beautiful. The pleasure I feel in listening to the piece is vivid. There is no mistaking the reaction I have when I listen to it, and there is no mistaking that it is the piece itself that is the object of my listening. I can achieve understanding in this sense before I try to form anything like the articulations of my pleasure that I give in in the three cases above.

What about understanding why? Can I understand why the movement is beautiful? No, I am going to argue. The matter is slightly more complicated here, however. Unlike with understanding that, it is not immediately obvious what it is to understand why something is pleasurable. What does understanding of that kind require, first in the case of pleasures in general, and in the case of aesthetic pleasure, in particular?

I said just above that understanding why is a matter of grasping an explanation that identifies sufficient causes. Without slipping all the way into a discussion of

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the nature of causal explanation, it is possible to say that such explanations will be *general* to some degree. In the stereotypical case, they will appeal to law-like generalizations of one kind or another, such as statistical models or generalizations, or even universally quantified propositions. To explain why the ball fell, for example, and very roughly, is to grasp some facts about the initial state of the ball, along with the fact of its being released, along with a generalization about the way bodies behave under the influence of gravity. Understanding why something happened—or why something is the case, or why something has the property it does—will appeal to, or at least reflect some grasp of, a general proposition of this kind. That grasp, even if it is not explicit, will be reflected in my behavior. I will behave in certain ways in the presence of falling balls.

How does all this apply to pleasures? In such cases, I suggest, the presence or absence of the right kind of general understanding will be reflected, roughly speaking, in the way an object of the pleasure is able to serve as a guide to pleasure in other cases involving non-identical objects. Less roughly, if I understand why something is pleasurable, then I do several things. First, I identify some property of the object \( P \) that it might share with another, non-identical object, and I believe, with enough confidence to act on it, that \( P \) would make a comparable contribution to how pleasing another object with \( P \) would be. Call this the *belief condition*. Second, and just as important, \( P \) really does make such a comparable contribution to pleasure, in the absence of relevant defeaters. Call this the *success condition*. These two conditions together specify a little theory of understanding why for pleasures.

The details are important, of course. It matters, especially, what constitutes a ‘comparable contribution’ to pleasure, and what counts as a ‘relevant defeater’. I will say something about both in the course of illustrating the theory.

It is meant to account for understanding why with respect to pleasures of all kinds, including those we take in tastes and smells—what Kant called aesthetic pleasures of sensation. And because these are more common and familiar than the pleasure we take in beauty, focus on them. Suppose I understand why the cake I’m eating is delicious. Then, according to my theory, various other things are true. Generally speaking, I use its properties as a guide to figuring out what else will be delicious. I believe, and with enough confidence to act on it, that the coffee-flavored chocolate icing is one of the things that contributes to how pleasing the cake is. I satisfy the belief condition. And, importantly, when I find something else that has coffee-flavored chocolate icing—a cupcake, say—it really does make a comparable contribution to how pleasing the cupcake is. The icing contributes to the cupcake’s being pleasing in much the way it contributed to the cake’s being pleasing, even though (assume for argument) the original cake was vanilla and topped with cherries, while the cupcake is red-velvet and filled with cream cheese. I satisfy the

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6 Ibid., 511.
7 Cf. Ibid., 512.
8 Again, see Ibid. The success condition corresponds to the requirement on understanding why that it be, in part, someone’s grasping a correct general explanation.
success condition.

In some cases, other properties might defeat the icing’s contribution to how pleasing the cupcake is. If it were made from carrot cake batter, the coffee/chocolate icing would likely contribute negatively to the cupcake’s being pleasing. The icing would make the thing less tasty, not more. Along similar lines: the cream cheese in the cupcake I imagined above might not interact with the coffee/chocolate icing in a way that is as pleasing as the way it interacts with the original vanilla cake. Still, the icing makes a comparable contribution to pleasure—roughly the same, even if not precisely the same. I still satisfy the success condition in the theory of understanding why for pleasures.

In other cases, however, the icing’s contribution to pleasure could be defeated altogether. Imagine the icing spread over a head of raw broccoli, for example. But the fact that the icing does not make a comparable contribution to pleasure in this case does not undermine my claim to understanding why the original cake is pleasurable. This is an example of relevant defeater, which the theory above mentions. The coffee/chocolate icing makes a comparable contribution to pleasure in the absence of relevant defeaters, such as raw broccoli.

My failing to meet either the belief condition or the success condition would undermine any claim I had to understanding why the original cake is delicious. If I tasted the cake and could only point to various different things about it—its texture, the fact that it isn’t overly sweet, the fact that it has only one layer and not two—but could not arrive at any belief about its properties that might guide in me in my search for other delicious desserts, then it would be false that I understand why the cake is delicious: I do not satisfy the belief condition. Even if I could bring myself to pick out the icing, but its appearance in other desserts led to various and different pleasure experiences, then it would be false that I understand why the cake is delicious, but for a different reason: I do not satisfy the success condition. In both cases of failure, it seems clear enough that I understand that it is delicious. I don’t understand why it is, though, as long as I can’t pick out any property of it and use it reliably as a guide to deliciousness in other cases. My understanding lacks the right kind of generality.

3 Understanding Why and Beauty

How should this apply to beauty?—to pleasure of that distinctive kind? Can I identify properties of a work of beauty, and use them as a guide to beauty in other cases?

It depends on what’s meant by ‘property’; more than one kind might serve as a guide to beauty in other cases. Both aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties can figure in the explanation of a work’s overall aesthetic value. A painting, suppose, is stately by virtue of being both elegant and occasionally frenetic. The latter two are aesthetic properties. And it is stately by virtue of having, among other things, red circles distributed across its canvas, frenetic by virtue of, among other things, the yellow squares in its lower right corner. The red circles and yellow squares are
nontaesthetic properties.

As I intend the questions above, they concern understanding why something is beautiful in terms of its nonaesthetic properties. This is plausibly the kind of understanding in which we are typically interested. When I listen to the Beethoven and try to understand what makes it beautiful, I am interested not in understanding how its other aesthetic properties might contribute to its beauty. I am interested in how its nonaesthetic properties do so, those features of the work with which I am immediately engaged. Unless I say otherwise, when I talk about understanding why I will be talking about understanding in this sense: in terms of nonaesthetic properties.

Is it possible, then, to identify nonaesthetic properties of a work, and use them as a guide to beauty in other cases?

There are some superficial reasons to think not. Continue to image I am trying to understand why the Beethoven is beautiful. My candidate property, suppose, is the broken chords in the first 8 bars. I believe they are part of what make the Beethoven aesthetically pleasurable. For this attempt at understanding why to be successful, other pieces of music be able to have the same kind of broken chords, too, and they must, in the absence of relevant defeaters, make a comparable contribution to how pleasing the other piece of music is.

But notice it is hard, in the first place, to think about what would count as ‘broken chords of the same kind’. How similar must they be to those chords in the Beethoven to count as being the same kind of property? And there is another problem. What counts as a relevant defeater? There will be many musical contexts in which broken chords will not contribute to how pleasant some music is. What makes it so that a property should not count against understanding why the music is beautiful, as the raw broccoli does not count against understanding why the cake is delicious? It can’t be that the absence of relevant defeaters requires a context that is extremely similar to the original. This runs against the generality required by understanding why. Some context-sensitivity is fine, but full context-dependence is not.

These musings should make us less hopeful that understanding why is possible in cases of beauty, but they are not really sharp enough to make the negative claim seem plausible. Consider the following, then. If it is possible to understand why something is pleasurable in the way it is, then the disposition to form the beliefs required by the theory of understanding why—by the belief condition, in particular—is a rational disposition. It is not in general true that, for anything it is possible to achieve, is not irrational to try, or to takes steps facilitating to achieving it. But in this narrower case, something like this does seem true. If it is possible to form true beliefs of the required kind, then it is not irrational to be disposed to form beliefs of that kind.

However, in cases of beauty, it does seem irrational to try. Imagine someone who wants to experience as much beautiful music as she can. To do so, her method is to examine some piece she finds beautiful—the Beethoven—and form beliefs that satisfy the belief condition on understanding why for pleasures. She identifies
candidate properties of that piece that she can pick out in others, and then she goes and listens to those other pieces. She shows some sophistication. She fixes on properties like broken chords, or wide spacing in the voices, and not properties like being a piece for solo piano, or even being a piece in E major (which op. 109 is). She recognizes that fixing on properties like the latter two would not yield understanding why because they would fail to meet the success condition; think about how many pieces of music in E major there are that are not beautiful.\(^9\) Still, were someone to approach her search for beautiful music this way, we would criticize her, I suggest. We would call her disposition to form the relevant beliefs irrational. But those are just the beliefs required by the theory of understanding why.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the aspiring music lover shouldn’t listen closely to music she likes and try to explain what about it she finds pleasing. This kind of articulacy will help her better understand and appreciate the music, as I have said. But the goal of attending to the music in this way is articulacy, increased sensitivity to properties of the music. The goal is not generalization, not that of constructing a theory about those properties that make music beautiful. The tendency to do that appears to be irrational, which—if it is—implies that the kind of understanding at which it aims is not possible.

While more satisfying than the first, this argument doesn’t take us very far, either. It doesn’t tell us why it is irrational to form the kinds of beliefs required by the theory of understanding why. We could be wrong, after all, in criticizing the disposition. It could be our own epistemic limitations motivating the criticism; maybe we have just failed to pursue the project of understanding why long enough to succeed.

What we want is some explanation of why understanding in this sense is not possible, which is at the same time an explanation of why it is irrational to be disposed to form the relevant beliefs. We want some explanation of why it is not possible to meet the success condition, that is, which would explain why being disposed to meet the belief condition is irrational. It’s to this explanation that I now turn.

3 The Particularity of Aesthetic Understanding

What I will argue, fundamentally, is that there is no satisfying the success condition in theory of understanding why. I will argue, along the way, that in certain cases the belief condition is very hard to satisfy, too. The conclusion, then, will be that, there is no understanding why something is beautiful in terms of its nonaesthetic

\(^9\) Incidentally, this is why we shouldn’t take music recommendations made by the algorithms in Spotify or Pandora to facilitate to understanding why. The kinds of properties these algorithms track are not even candidate properties for understanding why, because they would fail to satisfy the success condition. Music’s featuring acoustic guitar just isn’t the kind of property that makes a comparable contribution to pleasure in other work.
properties.

My argument will come in two stages. Each concerns the *particularity* of aesthetic evaluation—the claim that, in some sense, there are no general rules for determining whether something has aesthetic value. Each stage of the argument is independent of the other, but, as I will be explaining, they are complimentary, and both necessary for reaching my conclusion.

The first line of argument turns on the relative determinacy of the nonaesthetic properties that make an aesthetic difference in a work of art. My guide on this issue is Frank Sibley. According to Sibley, an object’s having some aesthetic value depends on that thing’s very determinate non-aesthetic properties. ‘A thing is graceful’, he says, ‘in virtue of being curved in exactly the way it is, not just in virtue of being curved. A slightly different curve might not be graceful, and so on’.¹⁰ There is no *determinable* property, like ‘curved’, such that, because a true description of an object can be given in terms of the property, there is a reason to believe it is graceful. There is, generally, no such link between determinable nonaesthetic properties and aesthetic properties, only between the latter and very determinate nonaesthetic properties.

Sibley’s ‘exactly’ suggests the nonaesthetic properties are *fully determinate*, but we do not need to go this far. It might be that other fully determinate curves, only slightly different from some graceful curve, would also be graceful. But some slightly relaxed version of the point is very plausible. Take some fully determinate curve that is graceful, and take a set of curves only slightly different from the original, and call it C. There is a subset of C, call it Cₖ, such that the following is true: that the original curve is graceful, and that some other unseen curve is in Cₖ, are together a reason for believing the unseen curve is graceful. But Cₖ will have very few members, and it will be very hard, if possible at all, to give a description that will be true of all and only the members of Cₖ, even after seeing both a handful of them and the original graceful curve. (‘A curve that moves up vertically and then slightly to the right before bending sharply rightward but not quite past a 45 degree angle’.) Sibley’s point is a good one: aesthetic values are realized by what I will call *ground-level* nonaesthetic properties, which I take to include, but not be limited to, fully determinate nonaesthetic properties.

This goes a long way toward explaining why it isn’t possible to understand why something is beautiful in terms of its nonaesthetic properties. To see why, think again about someone trying to understand why the Beethoven is beautiful. She aims to identify some candidate property of the work that might serve as a guide to beauty in other cases. Now notice that the candidate property is either a determinable nonaesthetic property, or it is a ground-level nonaesthetic property. Consider the first case. Suppose the determinable nonaesthetic property is ‘a sequence of broken chords’, which the beginning of the Beethoven can be correctly described as having. But the presence of this determinable property in another work

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would not contribute in a comparable way to another work’s beauty, because, as Sibley points out, determinable properties are not responsible for aesthetic values. Even if the music in some other work has broken chords at the beginning, it may or may not true that those particular broken chords contribute to the beauty of that other work in a comparable way. Such properties will not facilitate to understanding why because they will not satisfy the success condition.

The second case is that of a ground-level nonaesthetic property. Suppose it is ‘a sequence of broken chords very much like that one’. In this case, there is a slightly different problem. The problem is not that properties like this are insufficiently determinate to justify believing anything about the contribution they will make to pleasure. Rather, properties like this tend not to be general enough to be such that other, non-identical works might also have them. Another work is not likely going to have, for example, a sequence of broken chords so similar to the one in the Beethoven as to count as the same ground-level nonaesthetic property. Ground-level nonaesthetic properties, then, tend not to facilitate to satisfying the belief condition. (I return to the ‘tend not to’ in a moment.) They are not sufficiently shareable to support the kind belief required for understanding why.

Each of the two cases presents a different kind of failure, then. If the candidate property is a determinable nonaesthetic property, then it is not sufficiently determinate to be a guide to beauty, as required by the success condition. If the candidate property is a ground-level nonaesthetic property, though, then it is, as a rule, not sufficiently general to be shared by other works, as required by the belief condition. In either case, understanding why is not possible.

Even this doesn’t deliver us to my conclusion, however. The problem is the ‘tends not to’ in the case of ground-level nonaesthetic properties. It is true that such properties tend not to be general enough to be shareable by other works, so that, as a rule, they will not facilitate to satisfying the belief condition in the theory of understanding why. But what if we were, against the odds, to encounter the same ground-level nonaesthetic property in another work? If another work really did share, for example, properties with the Beethoven, maybe those properties would make a comparable contribution to pleasure? And if they did, wouldn’t I have understood why the Beethoven is beautiful, even if that understanding turns out to be pointless, practically speaking?—since no other work actually has the relevant property. In other words, it might be possible, however improbable, to satisfy the belief condition; and if that were satisfied, why think the success condition wouldn’t be satisfied, too?

To arrive at my conclusion, finally, I need to show that a ground-level nonaesthetic property, such as the broken chords at the beginning of the Beethoven, would not satisfy the success condition. And to do this, I turn to my second line of argument.

This second line of argument concerns the ‘polarity’ of the contribution to pleasure that nonaesthetic properties make. The issue of whether aesthetic evaluation is general or particular—whether there are any general reasons for
aesthetic evaluations—ultimately turns on this issue. Aesthetic evaluation is particular, in part, because it focuses on relatively determinate nonaesthetic properties of the work, which are not easily or typically shared by other works. But it is particular, moreover, because those relatively determinate nonaesthetic properties do not have an inherent polarity in the contributions they make to how aesthetically pleasing a work is. The latter is what I will now argue.

Consider that a cake’s having coffee/chocolate icing is a general reason to think that the dessert will be delicious. This is because that icing has an inherent polarity (for some reasonably large range of people). The icing makes the cake tastier, in general. ‘In general’ because there may be may be defeaters, as I discussed above. Some of these defeaters may even reverse the polarity of the icing’s contribution to pleasure, so that it contributes to the cake’s being more disgusting. But the generality of the reason is compatible with the possibility of defeaters, including such reversals of polarity.

What about the ground-level sequence of broken chords in the Beethoven? Does that have an inherent polarity? To answer yes is to believe that knowing that sequence of chords is a property of some other work is itself a reason for believing the work has some aesthetic value. Or, to change the case: what about smallish red circles each of a slightly different size clustered in the bottom right corner of a very large painting? Or a large, long-fingered hand-shaped indentation on the front of bronze statue, the overall shape of which is that of a cube with rounded edges? Are any of these a reason for believing the work has some aesthetic value or other? That they will be a source of aesthetic pleasure?

I suggest the answer in each case is no. I encounter a block in even trying to formulate an answer, which inclines me to believe the question is not really meaningful, that it does not deploy the relevant concepts—‘ground-level nonaesthetic property’, ‘inherent polarity’, ‘aesthetic value’, ‘aesthetic pleasure’—in intelligible ways. But this is at bottom a matter of intuition. It is my intuition that, some work’s having any one of the nonaesthetic properties above is no reason for believing the work has aesthetic value, that there is any aesthetic pleasure to be had, at all.

Consider, by contrast, that the situation is altogether different when we are thinking about aesthetic properties. That some music is serene and stately—think of the first variation in Beethoven’s op. 111—does have an inherent polarity. These make positive contributions to a work’s aesthetic value, to its being aesthetically pleasing. And this is true even though those properties can be defeated in one way or another, and even reversed. Knowing some work is serene and stately is a

12 Again, see Bender, ‘General but Defeasible Reasons in Aesthetic Evaluation’.
13 Bender, ‘General but Defeasible Reasons in Aesthetic Evaluation’, 381. Bender brings up ‘reversing defeaters’, as he calls them, in discussing a case of Sibley’s.
reason for believing the work has some (further) aesthetic property or other. These truths are reasons for believing that aesthetic evaluation is not altogether particularistic.

These truths, however, concern the contributions that aesthetic properties make to realizing other aesthetic properties. They concern understanding why in terms of aesthetic properties, not understanding why in terms of nonaesthetic ones. And there is an important difference between the cases, which some discussions of the particularly of aesthetic evaluation miss. Aesthetic properties do have an inherent polarity. Aesthetic evaluation on their basis is to that extent general. Ground-level nonaesthetic properties, by contrast, do not have an inherent polarity. Aesthetic evaluation on their basis is to that extent particularistic.

And it’s for this reason that ground-level nonaesthetic properties, even if they do support satisfying the belief condition on understanding why, will not support satisfying the success condition. It is not just that other works will very probably not share those ground-level properties, but also that such properties have no inherent polarity. The contribution they make to pleasure—to beauty—will depend on the way they figure in that other work. It will do so not in the sense that there will be a complex interaction between different inherently polarized properties of the other work, but in the sense that the candidate nonaesthetic property will get its very polarity from its relationship to those other properties. There is, therefore, there is no understanding why something is beautiful in terms of nonaesthetic properties.

And this, finally, is why we react critically to the disposition to form the beliefs required by the theory of understanding why for pleasures. It is a disposition aimed at satisfying requirements it is not possible to satisfy.

4 Conclusion

In section 1, I gave three reasons for thinking that I can improve my understanding of a work’s beauty. I can explain it more articulately to myself and to others. I can also become more sensitive to beauty in a particular art form. That is, I can become better at discerning beauty in music, for example, than I am at discerning it in sculpture. If these are not cases of understanding why, what are they?

It will not be surprising when I suggest that each is a case of understanding that. In the first two cases, in which I am able to explain to myself and others what about the work I find pleasing, I am making explicit my understanding that the work is beautiful. I am doing so by making explicit to myself what I take to be the object of my pleasure—that particular contrast, that particular sequence of broken chords followed by the change in tempo. My understanding that a piece is beautiful might be especially subtle in some cases, and so making it explicit to someone else helps

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14 Bender’s examples of general reasons in aesthetic evaluation have aesthetic properties in the reason, e.g. ‘elegance or wit/ness may be prima facie merit-making properties, and they may be adequate to cite as one’s reason for valuing a work, even though not every work is made better for its elegance or wit’ (Bender, ‘General but Defeasible Reasons in Aesthetic Evaluation’, 380).
that person come to understand that the work is beautiful, as well. But in neither case am I or the other person understanding why the work is beautiful.

The same applies to third case, in which I become better and more practiced at discerning beauty in a particular art form. Here I am refining my capacity for understanding that things of a particular type are beautiful, increasing the range of things to which I can be responsive in the right way, and so on. Practice with a particular genre makes me more sensitive to subtle contrasts, the range of possible relationships that might exist in work of that kind, and so more fluent in distinguishing among subgenres and recognizing something outstanding when I see it. This doesn’t mean that I achieve any better understanding why things of that type are beautiful. It means my capacity for understanding that is becoming deeper and more lively.

None of this should be discouraging. The conclusion amounts to no dig, implicit or explicit, at critical discourse and critical reasoning. Understanding that something is beautiful, and being able to share that understanding, are both extremely valuable. This is so even if understanding why is not possible.

This might raise questions, though, about why the conclusion should matter, aside from its bearing on the issue of whether aesthetic evaluation is general or particular. Why should it matter whether we are able to have understanding why in terms of nonaesthetic properties? There is more than one answer, which I pursue in other work, but I cannot develop them here in any clear and concise way. I can hint at the issues, in broadest terms, by saying that understanding why—the kind of general understanding it embodies—is required for the application of certain important practical concepts, such as the concept of being identified with or alienated from an attitude. This bears on how we locate aesthetic pleasures along the spectrum of internality and externality that these concepts define.

Rather than attempt futile gestures at work done elsewhere, though, I want to end by briefly returning to Kant. As I said at the beginning, he would have agreed with the conclusion of my argument, but for his own reasons. I mentioned some of these in the introduction. Kant thought objects of beauty seemed as if designed to elicit pleasure from us, but we cannot understand how that goal could have led to the particular configuration of sensible properties we encounter in the object.

But Kant had a further explanation for why this is true. In Kant’s view, the explanation for why we cannot understand why something is beautiful in terms of its nonaesthetic properties lies in the nature of the mental activity by virtue of which we experience beauty. That explanation does not appeal to the kinds of abstract considerations mine did, such as the claim that nonaesthetic properties have no inherent aesthetic polarity. It does not bottom out in an intuition, as mine did. An explanation which does neither, like Kant’s, will be appealing to some, even if it is

obscure. So what is it?

According to Kant, when we reflect on an object we judge to be beautiful, the mind comes to be engaged in a distinctive mental activity, which Kant calls the free play of imagination and understanding. The pleasure we feel in reflecting on something we find beautiful just is, in Kant’s view, our consciousness of this mental activity (5:222).

The nature of the free play, though, is opposed to the requirements of understanding why. One way to appreciate this is by noting how Kant explains the way concepts figure in it. In the typical case, in which there is no free play, we experience objects in the world around us as having a reliable kind of organization. Think of a dog on a lawn, with two ears and four legs. And concepts, for Kant, play an essential role in explaining why this is so. We regularly experience dogs as having two ears and four legs because the mental activity by virtue of which we experience them is grounded in concepts.

When we experience beauty, however, things are very different. Our mental activity—the free play of imagination and understanding—is neither ‘grounded on concepts nor aimed at them’ (5:209). This means many different things, in Kant’s account, but I mention it to make the following point. As I just said, the mental activity by virtue of which we experience dogs, for instance, is grounded in concepts, so dogs exhibit certain objective regularities. The free play of imagination and understanding, however, is not grounded in concepts, so what we experience by virtue of it—beauty—will not exhibit objective regularities in the way our experience of dogs does. The free play might present to us objective properties of all different kinds, depending on the object: broken chords, small red circles and large yellow squares; it is not grounded in concepts, so there are no constraints. And so, Kant says, there can be no rules, proofs, or objective principles for judgments of taste—in my terms, no understanding why in terms of nonaesthetic properties (5:285-6).