

Aesthetics, Objectivity, and Particularism
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We begin with a pair of scenarios:

On Tuesday, Edgar is hosting an opening at his gallery, Art Maison, for his friend, the up and coming painter Andrew. Knowing that this is an important opportunity for Andrew, Edgar has assured him that he will do his best to bring off the event successfully. Edgar also knows that proper lighting is critical for art to look its best, and several bulbs at the gallery have recently gone dead and need to be replaced. But a trip to the store is inconvenient, and for no better reason than that, he neglects to replace them. As a consequence, at the opening Andrew's paintings are less impressive than they otherwise would be.

Now consider another dimension and perspective.

Andrew is having an opening at the gallery of his friend Edgar on Tuesday night. The event is important to him and he wants his paintings to be as good as they can be. In preparation for the show, he is working on a small abstract entitled Mood. The work is pleasing and competent, but hardly stands out. It lacks excitement and cannot hold viewing interest. After looking at the work in progress for some time, Andrew decides to divide the canvas horizontally with a thickly painted dark red line. Once applied, Mood comes together in a way it hadn't before. It is dynamic and holds the eye.

The facts reported in the first vignette may prompt the following judgments:

Edgar was wrong not to replace the bulbs.

The fact that proper lighting was important for a successful opening and that Edgar had assured Andrew he would try to make the event a success are moral reasons for Edgar to replace the bulbs.

The facts reported in the second vignette may prompt similar judgments, such as:

Mood is beautiful (or aesthetically good).¹

The horizontal red line makes Mood beautiful.

Without proposing to analyze these judgments, our discussion takes the following as starting points.

First, each of these judgments is justified. They merit the credence we place in them and do not fall short of ordinary standards of justification. Second, each of these judgments is subject to revision and refinement. Most obviously, the coming to light of further, so far unspecified facts, might force one to abandon entirely any of these judgments. Less obviously, additional thought or facts might lead one, justifiably, to refine these judgments, especially the second in each pair. The judgments do not purport to offer fully precise or complete explanations of, in the first instance, Edgar's wrongdoing or, in the second instance, Mood's beauty. Just as someone who claims that faulty wiring was the reason for the fire might refine their explanation without withdrawing it, so too someone might refine without withdrawing a judgment about what made an omission wrong or a painting beautiful.

Second, both the moral and the aesthetic case are arguably characterized by holism of the sort explored by Jonathan Dancy. For present purposes, holism can be characterized as the possibility that a feature that makes something good or bad (whether morally or aesthetically) in one context might not have the same moral or aesthetic import in another case. It might have the reverse import or none at all. Mood is made beautiful, we suppose, by the horizontal red line. Transpose such a line to another work, and it may fail to do its beauty-making work. It may even disrupt a work that otherwise would have been beautiful and leave it ugly. In the ethical case, the fact that Edgar had assured Andrew is a wrong-making feature. But in other circumstances, such assurances may be ethically inert. According to the holist, then, moral and aesthetic relevance comes in several flavors. Features may be morally or aesthetically relevant because they are good-making features. Other features may be relevant as defeaters or enablers (or, countenancing negative facts, absences of these), which make it the case that some other feature is (or is not) a good making feature itself.

¹ In the discussion that follows we will use beautiful simply to mean aesthetically good.

Whether holism is true – whether the possibility it describes is a genuine possibility – must depend upon the true story about what the good-making features actually are. Since we have already conceded that our characterization of the good-making features is subject to refinement, it is possible that the ultimately proper refinement of good-making features will reveal features that are context invariant. If the proper way to refine our conception of good-making features is to consider all manner of possible cases, we might even find features whose evaluative import is context invariable. Even so, our ordinary and unrefined judgments about what is good-making presuppose holism and we yet see no good grounds for thinking that the process of refinement *must* excise holism from the scene. So for present purposes, we assume the reverse. We assume that the holism we find reflected in our intuitive judgments is indicative of how the evaluative functions quite generally and is not an illusion generated by our relative ignorance.

One point on which we shall insist however is that holism does not lend credence, much less establish, that there are no true and exceptionless principles governing either morality or aesthetics. Such principles would convey sound explanatory information about why for example, some acts are wrong or some objects beautiful. The crux of the argument, which we have given in more detail on prior occasions, is this. A principle can itself make reference to how defeaters and enablers function in relation to a potential good-making feature. The fact that we must (if holism is true) take account of enablers and defeaters is perfectly compatible with the thesis that these contextual features behave in quite predictable ways that sound principles might capture.

In fact, we have argued that, in the moral case, our knowledge of particular cases presupposes the availability of moral principles, even on the assumption that holism is true. It is at this point, that trouble begins. Whether one's philosophical proclivities run to particularism or generalism, a good question to ask oneself is how far one is prepared to press either thesis before embarrassment kicks in. For us, the problem is this. If we claim that our knowledge of Edgar's wrongdoing presupposes that generalism is true in ethics, must we be forced to agree that our knowledge of Mood's beauty presupposes generalism in aesthetics? Both cases, we are prepared to admit, are characterized by holism and susceptible to knowledge. How, then, might they be distinguished? And is this relevant to the relative prospects of generalism in ethics and aesthetics? The questions could be pressed by a particularist, who wants to argue that our defense of generalism in the moral sphere must be unsound because if

it were sound it would extend seamlessly to the aesthetic case, and thereby “prove too much.” In effect, this paper aims to address this particularist challenge to our defense of moral generalism.

The cleanest route for us would seem to be to leave the parallel undisturbed and defend generalism in aesthetics. But for two reasons we find this unsatisfactory. First, like many philosophers, we find ourselves much more sympathetic to particularism in aesthetics than in ethics. It seems possible to us that what makes Mood beautiful is the horizontal red line. But it is quaintly ridiculous to suppose that there is some default principle governing horizontal red lines. And even if the truth of such a principle could be made out, what is gained by way of understanding beauty once we know that horizontal red lines always make objects beautiful unless there is some specific defeating condition that prevents their doing so?

Those sympathetic to generalism in aesthetics would do better to deny that what makes Mood beautiful is its horizontal red line and instead to insist that what makes Mood beautiful is some feature of more plausible general relevance. Perhaps the line gives Mood a balanced composition, and it is the balance that makes Mood beautiful. Then one could, with greater plausibility, claim that balance always contributes to beauty unless defeated. It is not our aim to argue against this possibility, but neither do we wish to be committed to it. In short, we would like to be able to argue for generalism in ethics while leaving generalism in aesthetics an open question.

The second reason we find the clean route unsatisfactory by itself is that it leaves unexplored whether there are good grounds for the *apparent* asymmetry. Even if generalism is true in aesthetics, as we agree it may be, we are surely not alone in finding particularism more attractive in the aesthetic case than in the ethical case. In fact, one of the best ways, to motivate particularism in ethics is by analogy to particularism in aesthetics. We suspect it is in part because many philosophers are attracted to particularism in aesthetics that they can be brought to engage seriously with the possibility of particularism in ethics. This raises the question: are there salient differences between the aesthetic and the ethical case that explain why particularism appears more attractive in aesthetics (even if this appearance is misleading). Until we are prepared to disturb the parallel between the case of Edgar’s wrongdoing and Mood’s beauty, we will be unable to find such an explanation.

Another route by which we might try to escape the problem is to deny that we have knowledge in the aesthetic case. We do not wish here to take on the burden of arguing for aesthetic knowledge, but neither do we wish to deny such knowledge. One reason is dialectical. One advantage we claim for our argument for generalism in ethics is that it does not require any particular metaethical analysis of moral judgments or moral knowledge. Our argument, as we put it, runs ‘downstream’ from the possibility of moral knowledge in particular cases and to moral principles. In this dialectical context, however, the assumption that we have moral knowledge of particular cases functions as a piece of common sense that we share with particularists. But common sense also includes claims to knowledge in the aesthetic case. Another and more important reason to shun this route is substantive. Even if our common sense claims to aesthetic knowledge in particular cases are unsound, this would not show that our common sense claims to aesthetic knowledge do not presuppose generalism. It would simply be the case that generalism is false because we actually lack aesthetic knowledge. But this threatens to leave in place the conditional claim that we could have aesthetic knowledge only if there were aesthetic principles.

A better solution, so we think, is to distinguish the cases. To do so we begin by briefly reviewing the main outlines of our argument for generalism in the moral case, drawing special attention to those assumptions of our argument that will lack ready analogues in the aesthetic case.

II. Revisiting Generalism as a Regulative Ideal

In *Principled Ethics*, we argued, sequentially, for four theses. First, there are true and non-vacuous hedged moral principles. Such principles convey genuine explanatory information about what makes something have the moral qualities it does, but they are hedged by a certain kind of *ceteris paribus* clause. Second, it is in principle possible to ‘trim the hedges’ and replace the *ceteris paribus* clause with a concrete specification of what could make things not otherwise equal. Third, we have good moral reason to engage in the kinds of reflection that yields principles, both hedged and un-hedged. Fourth, such principles can have a valuable role to play in guiding the virtuous agent. For present purposes we will focus on the first two theses and our arguments for them.

Default principles, we claim, can be drawn from our knowledge of particular cases. Assuming holism for the sake of argument, this simply reflects the fact that whenever a feature has one moral valence in one context and a different moral valence in another context, there will be some explanation of this. Again, particularists agree, for they accept supervenience, and argue that when a feature loses its moral relevance that this is due to the presence of a “defeater.” The particularist just argues that these defeaters cannot be codified in humanly manageable terms, and anyway that moral practice gets along just fine without them. We argue that even if the particularist is right about the multiplicity of possible defeaters that we can still derive a very modest “hedged” principle from our moral knowledge in the case at hand. For we can formulate a principle which simply *quantifies over* all possible defeaters (and other relevant contextual features). So we might have a principle of the form:

If an action would produce pleasure then that is a reason in favour of the action unless some other feature of the situation explains why it is not.

An important and familiar objection to ‘ceteris paribus’ laws whether in morality or in the philosophy of science is that they are trivially true. If hedged principles come to little or nothing more than ‘F is a reason except in those cases where it is not,’ they will be of little interest.

In the moral case, our reply to this objection turns on the assumption that not any feature can be a moral reason. Some features can never be reasons. For example, the fact that an action is done in a leap year is never a moral reason to perform the action. If that is right, then the following is not, on our account, a sound hedged principle.

(LY) For all actions (x): If (a) x would be done in a leap year and (b) no other feature of the situation explains why the fact that x would be done in a leap year is not a moral reason not to x, and (c) the reasons in favour of x do not explain why x is not wrong in virtue of the fact that x would be done in a leap year, then x is wrong in virtue of the fact that x would be done in a leap year.

The principle is unsound because the failure of the leap year fact to be a reason is not explained by any contingent ‘feature of the situation.’ Being done in a leap year can never be

a moral reason, and so no contingent fact explains this. Whether it has an explanation at all turn on whether one thinks necessary truths admit of explanation. But how one comes down on this question does not directly bear on our argument. In either case, no feature of the situation is needed to do the explaining.

This is important for two reasons. First, it confirms that our argument really does depend upon moral knowledge of particular cases. It is this knowledge that guarantees that we have identified a feature that at least can be a moral reason. Second, it shows that default principles can be informative. They discriminate between features that can be moral reasons and those that cannot be.

Now consider how the analogous arguments would go in the aesthetic case. Return to our original example of Edgar's work of art, *Mood*. Recall that, by hypothesis, the red line contributed to the beauty of the work. We also supposed that a competent judge could know that *Mood* has aesthetic value. Now suppose we tried to extract an aesthetic "default" principle from this case in a manner analogous to our strategy in the moral case. Presumably, the principle would be something like:

For any given object of aesthetic evaluation A, If A contains a red line then unless some other feature of A explains why the inclusion of the red line does not contribute to the aesthetic value of the work, the inclusion of the red line does contribute to its aesthetic value.

This is not a very plausible candidate for an interesting aesthetic truth, however true it may well be, strictly speaking. Moreover, our argument for moral generalism reveals why this might be so. If, in the aesthetic case, it is really true that any given contingent feature could, in the context of the right sort of object of evaluation, contribute to its aesthetic value, then aesthetic default principles will be trivial in a way moral default principles are not. Is it true that, given the right context, any feature could give rise to aesthetic value?

Admittedly, it is easy to be impressed by the variety of features that give rise to beauty, but since our aim is not to defend aesthetic particularism, we needn't defend an affirmative answer. In the next section, however, we will offer grounds for thinking that a negative answer is difficult to defend, even if it is true. If that is right, then one of the key premises in

our argument for moral generalism is much more doubtful in the aesthetic case. Before introducing that argument, however, we briefly return to the second stage of our argument for generalism in the moral case.

In the second stage of our case for generalism as a regulative ideal, we argue that, in the moral case, we can “trim the hedges.” In particular, we argue for the availability of moral principles whose defeating and enabling conditions have been fully and finitely spelled out in descriptive terms. We argue for the availability of such principles on three grounds. First, we argue that the best account of practical wisdom entails the availability of such principles. Second, we argue that the availability of such principles falls out of a plausible way of sorting a priori from a posteriori knowledge in our moral knowledge in particular cases. Third, we argue that the availability of such principles gets support from common sense reflection.

This last argument is of little interest here since it is precisely the asymmetry between common sense moral generalism and uncommonsensual aesthetic generalism that it is partly our goal to vindicate.

Of course, if we cannot even secure non-trivial default principles, then it might seem like the second stage, in which we “trim the hedges” is a non-issue. In fact, this is far too quick, though. For even if our procedure for generating default principles fails for the aesthetic case, this only counts against an argument for aesthetic generalism, not against aesthetic generalism itself. As noted above, there might be principles which provide deeper explanations by invoking more abstract concepts like “having a balanced composition.” Might the arguments we offer for un-hedged moral principles extend more readily to the aesthetic case.

Take first, then, the argument from practical wisdom. We claim that a widely held ideal practical wisdom (one that should be antecedently attractive to particularists as well as generalists) is best explained by the availability of un-hedged principles. To motivate the argument, we rely on a thought experiment involving an interstellar journalist named Wanda, who is by hypothesis a person of practical wisdom. Recently assigned to cover some recent events in an alien culture, Wanda wants to write a story which not only presents the facts, but also offers a moral opinion. She has a source who is entirely honest and forthcoming but will

provide only the empirical facts and not moralize one way or the other. Our argument was that in this case, in virtue of her practical wisdom, Wanda would know what questions to ask to find out the relevant facts, and that on the basis of the answers to these questions, she would be in a position to tell her readers the whole story. We then argued that her ability to know which questions to ask, and when she could reasonably stop and draw a conclusion, showed that the number of potential moral reasons, relevant defeaters and meta-defeaters, etc. was both finite and not beyond the ken of the person of practical wisdom. From this we argued that we could “trim the hedges” – that is, that unhedged moral principles were available to us insofar as we approximate practical wisdom.

What might this line of argument look like when transposed to the aesthetic case? If Wanda is re-assigned to the Arts pages, could she write reliable stories, stories that included well grounded aesthetic evaluations, if she were compelled to rely on sources who would only describe works of art in non-aesthetic terms? Intuitively, we think, she would not. Forced to rely on second hand description (even entirely accurate description) Wanda would remain hamstrung. If that is right, then our ideal of practical wisdom in ethics differs markedly from our ideal of ‘aesthetic wisdom,’ in ways that block the extension of our argument for moral generalism.

What about the argument that the availability of such principles helps sort the a priori from the a posteriori in the ethical case? There are good reasons, in the moral case, for supposing that our knowledge in a particular case can be divided sharply into a priori and the a posteriori components. Moral principles are known a priori and cooperate with contingent facts known a posteriori yield particular moral conclusions. In the aesthetic case, however, it seems much more difficult to prise apart a priori and a posteriori knowledge. Indeed our aesthetic knowledge seems stubbornly empirical. In the next section, we try to make some progress towards explaining why this is so. The explanation, not surprisingly, also sheds light on why our ideals of practical moral wisdom differ from our ideals of aesthetic wisdom. But it also explains why the thought that anything might be a beauty making feature is much more difficult to dislodge than the corresponding idea that anything might be a moral reason.

III. Evidence, Observation and Context Sensitivity.

One apparently important difference between ethical knowledge and aesthetic knowledge is the special authority that attaches to observation. If one were to observe Edgar's assurance that he will work for the success of the opening and his subsequent failure to tend to the lighting, this would not leave one markedly better placed to judge his action wrong than if one were to learn of what he did by having it described by a reliable source. By contrast, not seeing Mood is a serious obstacle to knowing that it is beautiful. Indeed, a reader of this very paper, we suspect, could conclude (at least provisionally) that Edgar's conduct was wrong simply based on our description. By contrast, our claim that Mood is beautiful and made beautiful by its horizontal red line is an essential piece of stipulation. Without seeing Mood it would surely be very difficult to conclude that it is beautiful. Anyone who saw the painting could properly claim to be in a superior position to judge its beauty.

This asymmetry is also revealed in the advantages and disadvantages of being in either Edgar or Andrew's position. Edgar, we are inclined to think, should be well able to avoid the kind of wrong he commits. This is because he is in a position to know, in advance, that his incipient failure to improve the lighting is wrong. That is, simply thinking through what he is about to do (or in this case fail to do) will often be enough for Edgar to know whether his contemplated act is wrong. Andrew, by contrast occupies a much more difficult position. If his goal is to make Mood beautiful, it may well be very difficult for him to know whether adding the red line will succeed until he tries and observes the results. This is not to deny that artists rely on rules of thumb when creating works. But we expect that the creation of new and beautiful works of art will be characterized by trial and (sadly) a great deal of error.

Before trying to define this asymmetry more precisely, it is worth noting two implications we are keen to avoid. It is sometimes thought that sensory experience conveys information that cannot be conveyed by description in other terminology. Thus, for example, some have argued that someone who sees the color red has acquired information (what red looks like) that could not be conveyed in other terms. Whatever the merits of this thesis and the arguments for it, the authority of experience with respect to aesthetic knowledge is an independent matter. Or so it seems to us. For those who think that there is information uniquely introduced by sensory experience do not deny that we can subsequently convey this information to others using concepts drawn from visible experience. And in the aesthetic case the chief problem is not that we lack vocabulary for describing the features of that might give rise to beauty. The problem is rather that a typical object of aesthetic evaluation will

have many features, and how these many features work together in a unified experience is of critical importance in judging beauty. Even if we gave a quite thorough description of Mood using visual language, someone who had this description in hand but had never seen Mood would be lacking the best sort of evidence for assessing Mood's beauty.

Second, the distinctive authority of observation in aesthetic knowledge need not be parasitic on a particular analysis of aesthetic concepts. On one commonly held view, aesthetic concepts are response-dependent in the following sense. Any proper accounting of the objects to which these concepts properly apply would make essential reference to our responses to those objects. If this analysis were correct it might be thought to explain and thereby lend credence to the view that experience is a special source of evidence for beauty. After all, the thought might go, by experiencing an object one might trigger the very response that is definitive of ethical concepts. But even if this is true it is not clear that it yet explains why experience is especially authoritative in the aesthetic case. After all, response-dependent accounts of moral concepts are also widely held, but experience does not have in that case a similar authority.

Of course, the fact that response-dependent accounts are available in both the moral and aesthetic sphere does not mean that such accounts are equally plausible in each sphere. Moreover, it may be that the aesthetic sphere is more amenable to fundamentally subjective versions of response-dependence than the moral case. Moral reasons are famously thought to be categorical and universal, and on some Kantian views they apply in the same way to all rational agents as such. Few would venture the same level of objectivity in the aesthetic sphere. However, although we have some sympathy for this possible asymmetry, we do not here want to rest our case on it. For we do not here want to presuppose that the aesthetic case is, in fact, best understood in terms of a highly subjective form of response-dependence. More importantly, our arguments for generalism in the moral sphere are neutral on these broader issues of the categorical nature of moral reasons and their universality, etc. So if we want an account of why those arguments do not carry over to the aesthetic sphere, it will not do simply to posit a greater degree of subjectivity in the latter.

Our idea, instead, is to explore the apparent authority of observation in the aesthetic case. So far, we have done little but gesture at the character of the authority we have in mind and we have been content to motivate the thought intuitively without offering a direct argument. We

should say something more, especially by way of clarification. But we hasten to emphasize the modesty of our aims. Our official aim is to see whether one can accept our case for generalism in ethics without being driven to accept generalism in aesthetics. To do this it is enough to chart a route by which the two cases might be distinguished.

The idea that observation has some kind of authority in the aesthetic sphere is plausible but vague. It is harder than one might imagine to move from the vague to the precise without thereby either making the thesis so weak as to be trivial and uninteresting, or so strong as to no longer be plausible. For example, one might claim that observation has a kind of authority in the aesthetic sphere in that knowledge of aesthetic value is impossible without direct observation. This seems too strong to be plausible. A consensus of all art critics that a given work is beautiful, for example, might be enough evidence for me to know that the work is beautiful even if I have not seen it myself.

The possibility of knowledge based on the testimony of experts might lead one to weaken the thesis as follows. To allow for such knowledge by testimony, one might hold that any knowledge of aesthetic value must either be based on direct observation or at least be parasitic on direct observation, e.g. by experts on whose testimony one relies. Even this characterization seems too strong to be plausible, though. Perhaps a suitably vivid description of a merely possible work of art which nobody has actually observed could be good enough for knowledge in a given case. One might weaken the idea even further, but at some point the doctrine might become plausible only by becoming trivial and uninteresting.

Note that these attempts to cash out the authority of observation were couched in terms of putative necessary conditions on *knowledge* of aesthetic value. We propose instead to capture the idea of the authority of observation in terms of a thesis about the relative quality of evidence. In particular, we want to claim that direct observation of a work of art by a competent judge provides the *best* kind of non-parasitic evidence for aesthetic value. By “non-parasitic” we mean simply to allow that the testimony of expert judges might trump one’s own judgment even when one has directly observed the work. The point is that this evidence will not be the *best* available evidence unless those experts have directly observed the work themselves, but in that case the evidence is still parasitic on direct observation by someone – namely, the relevant experts.

This thesis is modest in that it allows for knowledge of aesthetic value that is neither based on nor parasitic on direct observation. Yet it is not trivial in that it insists that any such knowledge will still not be based on the best possible evidence. Some might object that knowledge as such must be based on the best possible evidence. We think this sets the bar for knowledge far too high, but we do not need to insist on this here. The point is that for those who do think that knowledge is consistent with less than the best possible evidence, our approach allows for knowledge without direct observation by anyone. For those who hold the much more stringent view of knowledge, our approach will indeed entail that there can be no knowledge of aesthetic value without direct observation. However, the fact that our view when combined with such a stringent view of knowledge has arguably implausible consequences strikes us as more of an objection to such accounts of knowledge than to our view of what kind of evidence is best when it comes to judgments of aesthetic value.

Why should one believe that observation has this kind of authority? For a start, it nicely captures the idea that a proper appreciation of a work of art or other object of aesthetic assessment requires direct engagement with the work. It just strikes us as intuitively plausible that there is in this case no real substitute for direct experience. A vivid description of the Mona Lisa is no substitute for actually seeing it for yourself, nor is a vivid description of one of Mozart's symphonies a substitute for hearing it for yourself.

Indeed, we think this is plausible even for discursive objects of evaluation like novels or jokes. Here, though, hearing a perfect description of the work might be a way of directly observing it, so the contrast becomes less sharp. For a perfect description of a joke or a novel might, in principle, be of the form: "It goes like this: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...'" Descriptions which fall short of such perfect reproduction, though, seem less reliable as evidence. For in both novels and jokes, the precise form of words, style, pacing, and so on can all make a difference to the aesthetic value. Indeed, in the case of a joke, timing and manner of delivery might be extremely important. We are all familiar with a good joke being spoiled because someone "isn't telling it right" even if they use all the right words and sentences in the right order. The right pregnant pause, intonation, or facial expression can sometimes make all the difference.

There is, to be sure, a live question about what would count as genuine experience of a work of art or other bearer of aesthetic value. Naturally, this question will also then arise for when

one has the best evidence. For example, if someone employing an experience machine uses it to visit the Louvre does their virtual experience of the Mona Lisa count as having the best evidence? For present purposes we can sidestep this difficult question. The important point for our purposes is that these twin intuitions track one another. If one thinks that denizens of the experience machine have the best evidence, then one is also likely to think that the bearer of aesthetic value is something akin to a repeatable visual pattern that is present in both cases. If, on the other hand, one insists that the bearer of value is ultimately a particular pigment covered slab of wood fashioned by DaVinci, then one should also think that the best evidence is only to be found at the real Louvre.²

If the view that direct observation has this kind of authority still does not seem plausible, then here is an additional argument. Statements of aesthetic value are interesting in that they seem to conversationally implicate direct observation of the work by the speaker. This implicature, like conversational implicature can be cancelled, but the fact that it is the “default setting” is itself interesting and in our view stands in need of explanation. Our suggestion is that the best explanation of this pragmatic phenomena will advert to the sort of authority of observation we are proposing.

To illustrate the phenomena itself, we tell another story, this time a true one. One of us (MR), once was trying to choose a movie to rent with a group of friends. One of member of the group recommended a film, *Repo Man*, and told the rest of us, “This film is fantastic!” or words to that effect. On his recommendation and to our great disappointment, we watched the film. When confronted for bad taste, the person admitted not having actually seen the film himself; his assessment was based on a review he had read. We all felt not only cheated of a pleasant evening, but *misled*. And our friend had not only misled us about the movie; he had misled us about himself.

Even though our friend never said that say he had seen the film, reasonable inference would lead us to think that he had. The analogous inference would not be similarly reasonable in various non-aesthetic cases of evaluation. For example, I have never seen the chess program Rybka play chess, but I have read that it is currently the best chess playing computer program on the market by a considerable margin. Were I to assert, “Rybka is a fantastic chess engine”

² We wish to thank conversation with Dave Robb for helping us to think through this issue.

on the basis of such indirect evidence, I do not think my audience could reasonably complain that I was misleading them. Whereas even if we had all enjoyed *Repo Man* we could have reasonably made such a complaint against the friend who recommended it. What explains this difference?

If, as some philosophers claim, the “norm of assertion” is knowledge, this might be thought to do the job. For in that case, there is something infelicitous about asserting ‘p’ when one does not know that p. The person in our party who said that *Repo Man* is “fantastic” did not know it was fantastic, of course, since it is not. But even if one disputes this aesthetic verdict, one might think one could never be justified in believing (and so never know) that *Repo Man* is a good movie without having seen it.

That knowledge is the norm of assertion is controversial, but we set that worry to the side. Since we have already allowed that one can have knowledge without the best evidence, we cannot appeal to this principle to explain the phenomena here. To vary the example, the person recommended it on the basis of numerous highly reliable reviews, then perhaps he could have known it was fantastic (assuming for the moment that that is true). Yet we would, I think, still feel misled. So the idea that knowledge is the norm of assertion cannot do the needed philosophical work. Furthermore, the idea would seem to overgeneralize, and not draw the contrast we want to explain. For I do not think we would feel so misled by someone who said “Rybka is a fantastic chess engine,” if, for example, we discovered he was in some sort of bizarre “Gettier” case that he could not reasonably have anticipated. We certainly would not blame someone in this sort of case. This contrasts sharply with our reaction in the *Repo Man* case, in which we do indeed blame the speaker for misleading us.

However, a considerably weaker view in pragmatics but in the same spirit as the view that knowledge is the norm of assertion does seem to us both to be defensible and to the point here. The principle is that if someone asserts ‘p’ in a context in which it is well known that the best evidence for p is readily and easily available to the speaker, then unless the speaker says otherwise it is reasonable to infer that his assertion is based on the best evidence or evidence that is at least close to as good as the best evidence. Familiar Gricean norms of helpfulness and relevance make this modest principle reasonably plausible. Note that the principle does not insist on always getting the best possible evidence, even when it is easily

available. Only when the next best evidence is not close to as good as the best evidence is this required. So the principle is very modest indeed.

Consider another example. Suppose I am on the phone with my wife and ask her if we have any wine for dinner tonight, intending to pick some up on the way home if we do not. She says ‘yes’ but just relies on her memory when she could have taken two seconds to look into the next room at the wine rack. Whether this strikes us as a responsible assertion will depend on just how good her memory is. If her memory is truly excellent, or if she just checked the wine rack a few minutes ago, then it will seem responsible enough. If, however, her memory is poor and she has not checked in the past several days then not bothering to look around the corner will, all else being equal, be irresponsible. Our proposed principle yields the right result.

This principle, combined with our thesis about the special authority of direct observation, would be enough to explain why the person who recommended *Repo Man* as “fantastic” was thereby asserting irresponsibly. For the principle we have articulated is one that all speakers should implicitly grasp, in which case the speaker could be held responsible for taking account of that principle too. Having not seen the movie himself, he has not availed himself of the best evidence. This evidence is available; our friend could well have had occasion to see *Repo Man* in the past. Moreover, the evidence on which he did rely was not close to as good as the best available evidence. For, in fact, the critic on whose testimony he based his testimony is also notoriously unreliable.

One might object that the speaker might be, and be known to be, a very poor judge of aesthetic value in general, or of what makes for a good film in particular. In that case, he might argue, his assertion was based on the best available evidence, since the testimony of even a fairly unreliable film critic who has seen the film would provide better evidence than his own judgment would, and perhaps he did not have access to any reviews by better critics. In that case, his testimony was based on the best available evidence. Moreover, this reply does not beg the question. For the reply is consistent with our principle, since his assertion could then still be based on evidence which ultimately “bottoms out” in evidence based on direct observation – here the direct observations of the relevant film critic. Indeed, this reply actually highlights the plausibility of our proposed principle. For the proposed defence

would not be plausible if the speaker knew that the film critics on whom he relied had only read the script and not actually seen the film.

The reply is fair enough, as far as it goes. However, it functions only to highlight that our proposed principle will explain why our speaker's assertion was irresponsible only given certain further assumptions. Other principles will be needed to explain why his assertion is irresponsible if those assumptions are not allowed. Here we need the assumption that the speaker is, and is known to be, a reasonably good judge of the aesthetic value of a film. That assumption is reasonable enough, for otherwise we would not be disposed to rely on his testimony without pressing him for supporting evidence. However, the version of the story discussed in the preceding paragraph rejects this assumption. In this case, our proposed principle, which provides only a *necessary* condition for responsible assertion, will not explain why his recommendation was not apt. Here we would instead advert to a separate principle which requires that one not assert that p unless one's evidence that p is "good enough." What counts as "good enough" in the relevant sense is unavoidably vague, and may depend on the context and what is at stake, but on any plausible account an assertion of aesthetic quality based on the testimony of a notoriously unreliable critic is not good enough even if it is the best available evidence.

Suppose instead that we stipulate that the person who recommended the film is, and is known by us to be, an excellent judge of the quality of films. In that case, then even if his recommendation was based on the testimony of truly excellent film critics, we would still feel misled by his assertion. We suggest that this is at least in part because we think that his evidence would be even better if he had seen the film himself, so that he could compare his own judgment with that of the critics.

Of course, this reply assumes that the marginal difference between a judgment based simply on reviews and a judgment based on those reviews plus having seen the film himself is great enough that the evidence is not "close" to as good in the former case as it is in the latter.

Why should that be so? Suppose, after all, that he had consulted numerous reviews by reliable critics, and they all (amazingly, in this case!) were glowing. Even if he is himself an excellent judge of the quality of films, why take it that his actually having seen the film would improve *that* much on the evidence from such a body of expert testimony?

In a way, we do not need to press our point here. For the fact that this defence is plausible only if the critics have themselves seen the film and not just read the screenplay is enough to vindicate our basic idea about the authority of observation. However, the case does bring out another interesting nuance of aesthetic evaluation. Here we have in mind the context-sensitivity of standards of aesthetic evaluation. Some people enjoy traditional forms of comedy, some enjoy surreal, Pythonesque comedy, some enjoy political satire, and others simply do not care for comedy at all. Even those who generally enjoy comedy might not be in the mood for a comedy on a given evening. The crucial point here is that in saying a film is “fantastic” to your friends in the context of deciding on a film to rent and watch together, it seems reasonable to suppose that you are relying on standards of evaluation that suppose your friends would endorse.

It is here that having actually seen the film yourself is crucial. Even if the numerous critics on whose testimony you rely are in some objective (or highly intersubjective?) sense extremely good, those critics will of course have no idea what the speakers’ friends tend to value much less what they might be in the mood for on that particular evening. Whereas, the speaker, being our friend, might well be presumed to have at least some idea about these things. Here we think it is plausible to suppose that having actually seen the film would provide him with *much* better evidence as to whether the film is good *by the contextually salient standards of evaluation* than any extrapolation from the testimony of critics.

Of course, it is possible to make an informed judgment about this on the basis of expert testimony, but even an excellent set of reviews will typically barely scratch the surface of the rich detail of a film. If a picture is worth a thousand words then a two hour moving picture with sound (*Repo Man* was a “talkie”) will be worth far more. So even excellent reviews may simply not touch on aspects of the film which are especially important to some of those in the circle of friends at the video store. Here, we submit, there is no substitute for the speakers’ own combination of aesthetic expertise, knowledge of his friends’ tastes, *and* actually having seen the film himself. It is therefore reasonable to assume that in saying the film is “fantastic,” that he has seen it himself. After all, it would not be so much trouble instead to say that it is “supposed to be” fantastic!

We therefore conclude that direct observation has a sort of epistemic authority when it comes to aesthetic evaluative judgment. In developing one argument for this conclusion, the

context-sensitivity of aesthetic evaluation has also come to the fore. In our view, both of these features of aesthetic judgment mark it off in interesting ways from moral judgment.

First of all, we do not think it is anything like as obvious or as plausible that direct observation is the best evidence for a moral judgment. Direct observation of an action tends to focus one's attention on its immediate effects and its nature, and this may eclipse other features which are at least as morally important. For example, perhaps direct observation of an abortion would tend to arouse pro-life sentiments, just because the procedure can be very gruesome. No doubt, a pro-life proponent would argue that such direct observation thereby enhances one's judgment. However, the pro-choice camp can also argue plausibly enough that a direct focus on the action itself in this case can distract one from other important features of the situation, such as the impact of an unwanted pregnancy and child on the mother. In our view, direct observation may *sometimes* provide the best evidence for a moral judgment, but this will hardly be the norm in the way that it is in the aesthetic case.

Secondly, moral judgments are plausibly not context-sensitive in the same way that aesthetic case. At least, if we are talking about moral judgment in way that is not purely anthropological, but rather in a sense in which they implicate the judge's own moral emotions and sentiments. Obviously there is an anthropological sense in which one can speak of an action being wrong, but where this simply refers to the contextually given standards of a given society or subgroup. Moral judgment in this sense can be entirely detached. Radical moral relativist views to one side, we submit that an engaged moral judgment is not fundamentally contextually relative in this way. This, of course, is not to say that our moral judgments will not be sensitive to the context in a variety of ways. The point is that any such context-sensitivity will be derived from some context-invariant fundamental or ultimate moral standards or concerns. For the application of a moral principle will depend on the context. By contrast, in the aesthetic case, which standards are germane in the first place depends on the context. Of course, we do not pretend here to have argued against radical forms of moral relativism; that would take us too far afield. Instead, we here simply assume that the standard objections to such views are sound.³

³ XXXX reference to standard objections to relativism.

In our view, this difference in context-relativity reflects the fact that in the moral sphere we cannot rest easy with certain forms of fundamental disagreement. For morality is fundamentally practical, and functions at least in part to allow us to peacefully resolve our disagreements. So fundamental moral disagreement may make peaceful resolution of conflict impossible. By contrast, in the aesthetic realm, we can much more easily “agree to disagree.” “Different strokes for different folks,” as the saying goes. So “going relative” makes much more sense in the aesthetic case than in the moral case.

In this section, we have argued briefly for two differences between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment – the more universal authority of observation in the former, and the more fundamental context-relativity of the former. This puts us in a position to return to the debate about the role of principles in aesthetic judgment, and compare that role to the moral case in light of our own previous defence of a fairly robust role for principles in the moral case.

In section II, we noted that our arguments for moral generalism would extend to the aesthetic case only with the help of additional assumptions. Both to block the objection that default principles are trivial and to keep open the possibility of unhedged moral principles, it is critical that not just any feature can be a moral reason. Our argument for unhedged principles required adopting an ideal of practical wisdom that holds that we can acquire moral knowledge about novel cases by constructing (via asking question of a reliable source) and then responding to an accurate description. Last, our case for generalism gains plausibility if one supposes a sharp division between a priori and a posteriori components of moral knowledge. We are now in a position to better appreciate why these assumptions are quite dubious in the aesthetic case.

If the best evidence of aesthetic value is experience, then it is doubtful how one could ever disentangle aesthetic knowledge into a priori and a posteriori components. Aesthetic knowledge may prove stubbornly particular.

Second, if the best evidence for aesthetic knowledge is observation, then this would explain why the aesthetic analog of Wanda would not describe an ideal of aesthetic wisdom. Someone who arrives at aesthetic judgments by asking for (accurate) descriptions is forming judgments without the best evidence. Whether it is the best *available* evidence may depend upon how we further describe the case. But, in the actual world, it will very often be the case

that experience is available and that relying on descriptions is relying on evidence that is (much) less than the best. Anyone who, in the actual world, emulated an aesthetic analog of Wanda would therefore be aesthetically foolish, not aesthetically wise. What we seem to want in aesthetic wisdom, among other things, is a strong appetite for new aesthetic experiences and a wide open mind. To be sure, the insightful aesthete may have coherent and articulable aesthetic standards, but they must also have a well developed ability to look freshly at new experiences lest their sense of taste seem ossified or dogmatic.

Last, the authoritative role of observation helps to explain why it is difficult to dislodge the possibility that just about anything could be an aesthetic reason. Whatever our aesthetic experience may be it is radically limited. There will be many features we have never experienced, and even for those features we have experienced we will have done so only in a limited number of contexts. Before we ever claim that a feature can never be an aesthetic reason we would need to grant that we lack much of the best evidence that would bear on the question. In this context, holism is a boon to our argument since it casts doubt on inferring from the fact that a feature is not a reason in one case to the conclusion that it will never be in any others.

In the moral case, we would not want to deny that experience can lead us to revise our views of what can be a moral reason. But it does so, we suspect, by helping us to think of features we had never thought of before or by forcing us to attend to features we had previously ignored. But in either case, it provides evidence that is in principle available by other means. And just as our ideal of aesthetic wisdom places greater weight on greater open-mindedness, so some of our substantive aesthetic values appear to make a virtue out of necessity. Since observation can be expected to reveal surprising new features that can carry aesthetic value, creativity is a core artistic achievement. We conclude then that the authority of observation helps to explain why the very assumptions that are critical for our argument for moral generalism are unavailable in the aesthetic case. And this helps to show not only that we needn't suffer embarrassment for being forced to defend aesthetic generalism; it also helps explain why aesthetic particularism should appear more plausible than its moral counterpart.

IV.

So far our discussion has proceeded on the assumption of a clean and neat division between the aesthetic and the moral. This has made things very easy for us, but critics will be quick to point out that the two realms plausibly are interpenetrate in interesting ways. First, moral considerations might bear on aesthetic value, either by directly contributing aesthetic value or disvalue, or perhaps by functioning as a defeater, intensifier, enabler, etc. Second, aesthetic value might bear on moral evaluations, either by providing moral reasons, or defeaters, enablers, intensifiers, etc. for moral reasons. Interestingly, on the second of these two forms of interpenetration threaten our general thesis.

The first sort of interpenetration would entail that aesthetic knowledge will sometimes require moral knowledge. On our account, morality is principled, but this does not entail that aesthetics is principled. For the mere fact that moral considerations as such can bear on aesthetic value in no way implies that the ways in which those considerations bear on aesthetic value can be captured in a humanly manageable set of explanatory principles.

In a way the point is simple. If aesthetic value is unprincipled even without taking morality into account, then it is hardly likely that it the addition of *more complexity* from the moral realm to the aesthetic realm would make aesthetics more amenable to being codified in a suitable set of principles. This is so even if the moral realm itself is principled. For that only means that an aesthetic judge can invoke moral principles to determine some of the data on which his aesthetic judgment will be based. It does nothing to imply that the move from that data to an all things considered judgment can be mediated by further principles.

However, the opposite form of interpenetration does pose at least a *prima facie* challenge to our position. For if aesthetics is unprincipled, yet aesthetic considerations bear on moral verdicts then this seems to imply that morality is not, after all, principled. At least, it seems to imply that not the whole of the moral landscape can be captured in a set of suitable principles which take one from the purely descriptive to the moral.

One reply to this challenge would be to concede the basic point, and revise our moral generalism accordingly. For we could characterize the relevant moral principles not in terms of drawing connections between the descriptive and the moral, as we do in *Principled Ethics*, but instead in terms of connections between the *non-moral* and the moral. Since aesthetic value is not moral value, the interpenetration thesis would not obviously undermine moral

generalism so characterized. For our moral principles could then include principles which adverted directly to aesthetic value, without any pretense of providing purely descriptive criteria for such value. Moreover, moral generalism characterized in this way would still be extremely interesting and philosophically controversial.

Nor would this concession obviously betray the motivations behind our favoured moral generalism in the first place. For our moral generalism is, after all, a modest species of generalism, which aims to accommodate much of what we take to be plausible in the particularist critique. Of course, this concession does mean that some of the inputs to moral knowledge are not well understood in terms of the application of principles. However, because we defend generalism only as a regulative ideal, we never claimed that moral knowledge must always be *based on* antecedently available moral principles. Indeed, we emphasized that our view was instead a view on which moral principles should instead be extracted from what moral knowledge we might independently have, combined with suitable theorizing, and that for all we said there our initial moral knowledge could even be understood in intuitionist terms! So the fact that some of the knowledge one might need to apply a moral principle might itself not be acquired via the application of a principle is no threat to our view.

Indeed, it is worth noting that even more robust forms of generalism than our own, which claim that moral knowledge as such is always based on the application of some antecedent moral principle, could accommodate irreducible references to aesthetic value in the antecedent of a moral principle. Only a hypergeneralist view, according to which moral knowledge is best understood in terms of the application of principles *all the way down* would be committed to denying this. This, though, is no part of any generalist programme worth defending. For this would imply very strong claims in non-moral epistemology. In particular, for any morally relevant descriptive property (being pleasant, being an instance of knowledge, or whatever), our knowledge of *that property* must also be understood in terms of the application of principles. That, though, just seems incredible. Surely, experience and introspection, for example, can provide us with such knowledge without reliance on any psychological or other principle(s). In any event, it should certainly be no embarrassment for even a very robust form of generalism to reject such a view of our non-moral knowledge.

So one viable strategy for defending generalism as a regulative ideal is to move from principles linking the descriptive to the moral to principles linking the non-moral to the moral, thereby allowing aesthetic evaluations into the antecedents of moral principles. In fact, we shall not rely entirely on this strategy, though it is a useful back-up or “default” position if our preferred line of defense fails.

We reject this strategy as our first line of defense because we independently think that aesthetic value or disvalue as such cannot, in fact, function as moral reasons, or indeed as defeaters, enablers, intensifiers, diminishers of moral reasons. Our case for this position comes in two stages. First, we offer a general argument that aesthetic considerations as such could not function in these ways, given the nature of morality. Second, we examine putative counter-examples to our position and explain how in each case, the real explanatory work is done not by aesthetic value as such, but by some related non-aesthetic property.

The theory-driven argument is actually quite straightforward. It begins with the observation that moral agents as such are accountable for being able to know the difference between right and wrong. This is familiar from the role that Strawsonian reactive attitudes, and practices of praise and blame, constitutively play in moral practice as such. That is, we hold people responsible for their moral infractions, and we do not take “ignorance of the moral law” to be an excuse – save perhaps in extreme cases like that of the psychopath who arguably is genuinely incapable of the relevant moral knowledge.

Second, morality applies equally to all moral agents, and moral agency extends to all normal adult human beings. Morality is, in this sense, deeply universal in its intended scope. Aesthetic value, however, is not essentially universal in this way. For knowledge of aesthetic value can require special talents and skills not available to all normal human beings. In itself, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this. Aesthetics can in this sense be at least a somewhat elitist aspect of human evaluation. If, however, aesthetic considerations could function as moral reasons, defeaters, enablers, intensifiers, diminishers and the like then we would seem to face an unfortunate collision of universalism and elitism. For now we would be holding the ordinary agent, whose aesthetic sensibility might be extremely unrefined, responsible for whatever aesthetic knowledge as might be relevant to his decision-making. Given the robust ways in which praise, blame, and Strawsonian attitudes function in our moral practices, this seems deeply problematic. In effect, morality would then hold people

accountable for aspects of their situation entirely beyond their ken. This just seems unfair. In a contractualist framework (a la Scanlon), one might usefully put the point as follows: the aesthetic plebeian could reasonably reject any moral principles which made essential and irreducible reference to aesthetic value as such.

So much, then, for our theory-driven reason for rejecting this sort of interpenetration thesis. Now for our second argument. Are there any cases in which it is intuitively plausible to suppose that aesthetic considerations do function as moral reasons, defeaters, etc.? Here we can only consider a range of putative examples and explain how we would handle them, and hope that this inspires confidence that any other cases could be handled in similar ways.

Consider the suggestion that the fact that a joke is funny makes it morally permissible to tell it even though it is slightly offensive, or will make someone present rather uncomfortable. In our view, this is not the most plausible reading of the case. For suppose that nobody present would *find* the joke funny. In that case, the fact that it really is funny does not, in our view, provide the least bit of moral justification for telling it. Instead, what *arguably* (we are not entirely convinced of this, for the record) could do the relevant moral work would be the fact that some of those present would *find* the joke funny. That, however, is a psychological fact, and not a matter of aesthetic value.

It might be objected that in such a case, it is still the fact that the joke is funny that is the reason, but that the fact that some of those present would appreciate its humour is an enabler for that reason. Given our sympathy with holism in the theory of reasons, we do not reject this sort of move as a matter of principle. However, in our view it simply does not seem like a plausible construal of the case. Indeed, we would think that the fact that others might find the joke funny would itself be a reason in many cases even if the joke is not really funny at all, which in turn suggests that the real reason in both cases is that the joke will amuse someone, and not that it really is amusing in some more objective sense.

Someone might instead argue that beauty is valuable for its own sake. G.E. Moore took this view, for example. One might then argue that we morally ought to promote value, *ceteris paribus*, and that promoting beauty is therefore a sort of moral imperative, or at least provides some *ceteris paribus* moral reason. We certainly do not want to reject out of hand the idea that beauty is valuable for its own sake, nor even that its value might provide strong reasons

for action. However, the reasons in question do not seem to us to be plausibly understood as *moral*. So there might be cases in which the non-moral value of beauty could trump some moral value or prima facie moral duty, for all we have said here. The point will be that this would pose a challenge only to generalism about practical reason writ large, and not generalism about morality in particular.

Conclusion

Our primary aim in this paper has been a modest one. To be clear, we have not tried to argue against aesthetic generalism. Rather, our aim has been to highlight some salient differences between the moral and the aesthetic which on our view can explain why some forms of particularism are at least prima facie more plausible in the aesthetic case than in the moral case. In a way, this thesis of greater prima facie plausibility should be common ground between those sympathetic to moral generalism and those more sympathetic to moral particularism. For this contrast in terms of prima facie plausibility does have considerable immediate plausibility, and is of course consistent with the thesis that, all things considered, particularism is true in both cases (as it is consistent with the view that generalism is true in both cases). Indeed, particularists often try to motivate moral particularism simply by invoking the aesthetic case as a useful model or analogy, which itself suggests that particularism has greater immediate appeal in the aesthetic case. In this paper, we simply try to determine precisely why there should be this difference in prima facie plausibility.

To that end, we have we have contrasted the authority of experience in the aesthetic case with the more modest epistemic role of experience in the moral case. We have also contrasted the distinctively interpersonal and universal role of morality in regulating conduct by holding people, quite generally, accountable to moral standards with the more elitism-friendly conception of aesthetic value which most people find natural. Finally, we have explored the potential “interpenetration of the moral and the aesthetic,” and argued that this nuance, while very interesting, does not do any fundamental damage to the contrasts we have defended.

