

CHAPTER 10

Metaphor and Realism in Aesthetics

I THE PROBLEM

1.1 According to aesthetic realism, aesthetic thought and experience represent a range of distinctively aesthetic facts or states of affairs. True aesthetic judgments are true in virtue of the aesthetic facts or states of affairs which they represent. An aesthetic fact or state of affairs is a structured entity consisting of an object or event which possesses a genuine aesthetic property. So if an aesthetic judgment is true, it is because the object or event really does possess the genuine aesthetic property which it is represented as possessing. There are difficult and controversial questions concerning what it is for a property to be a genuine or real property. But I shall assume that this distinction can be drawn.¹ There is more to be said about aesthetic realism, but this characterization will suffice for the purpose of this chapter.

What I want to discuss here is one argument against aesthetic realism. I shall not discuss the reasons for holding this view. I shall be traveling only in one dialectical direction.²

1.2 Roger Scruton presents this argument in his book *Art and Imagination*.³ Novel metaphysical arguments are rare. This is one of them.

1. On the distinction between real and projected properties, see my "Quietism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 17 (1992).

2. The main reason for believing aesthetic realism is that no other theory seems to be able to do justice to the normative aspirations of aesthetic judgments. Once again, there is much more to be said about this motivation. See chapter 9 and chapter 11, section 1.

3. Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 38–44.

His argument takes off from the observation that when we describe things aesthetically, we often use words metaphorically. For example, we might describe a cloud or an insect as "delicate" or "balanced," and we might describe a piece of music as "gloomy" or as "moving" from one note to another. The normal nonmetaphorical use of these words is in the context of ordinary non-aesthetic descriptions. But here their use is metaphorical.⁴ Such descriptions contrast with our application of terms like "beautiful," "elegant," and "dainty," which are not used metaphorically in aesthetic contexts. These have no nonaesthetic use except one which is metaphorical. For example, we might speak of "a beautiful hand" in cards or "an ugly mood." There is no significant parallel in moral philosophy, so the ensuing argument could not be developed there.

Having noticed that metaphorical aesthetic description is rife, Scruton adds a certain general doctrine about metaphor. The general doctrine about metaphor which Scruton invokes is one which Donald Davidson developed more fully a few years later in his classic essay "What Metaphors Mean."⁵ Davidson argued that the words used in metaphorical contexts have only the literal meaning that they have when used nonmetaphorically. I do not want to review Davidson's very persuasive arguments here. For the most part, I shall assume that such a view is on the right lines.

Given these two premises, Scruton argues that aesthetic realism cannot be maintained—at least in regard to those aesthetic descriptions which are metaphorical.⁶

Why, exactly, is aesthetic realism threatened when we add Davidson's view of metaphor to the observation that many aesthetic descriptions are metaphorical? An aesthetic fact or state of affairs consists of the existence of an object or event which possesses a real aesthetic property. A realist must, therefore, be committed to the existence of a distinctive range of aesthetic concepts whose role is to pick out real aesthetic properties. If this is the general view about aesthetic properties, the realist must also hold such a view

4. I do not see why metaphor should be taken to be more important than simile in aesthetics. The two are easily mixed. For example, I might say that the buildings at Knossos float weightlessly due to their downwardly tapering columns, whereas the Parthenon sits heavily due to its upwardly tapering columns, in the way that a stodgy, tepid moussaka sits in one's stomach! But let us stick with metaphor.

5. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

6. Scruton directs his argument against the idea that there are aesthetic properties (*Art and Imagination*, p. 44), where this means that sentences which ascribe aesthetic properties have truth-conditions in a strong sense (p. 29); and this means that for some sentence 's', "there is some state of affairs which guarantees the truth of 's'" (p. 6).

about those aesthetic properties which are described metaphorically. So, in such cases, there must be distinctively aesthetic concepts which pick out aesthetic properties. Hence, the realist seems to require a difference of meaning between words used in normal and in metaphorical contexts. But this is disallowed by the Davidsonian doctrine about metaphor. If a word means the same in two cases, how can it be that we use it to describe a genuine aesthetic property in one case but not in the other? It is not literally true that music is sad or delicate.⁷ So given that in an aesthetic description of music, 'sadness' and 'delicacy' mean what they normally do, they cannot pick out a real aesthetic property of sadness or delicacy.

Scruton sums up his argument in the form of a dilemma:

The principal objection to the idea of an aesthetic property was this: either terms denoting aesthetic properties have the same meaning as they have when used in their normal contexts, in which case, how can we distinguish aesthetic properties as a separate class? Or else they have a different meaning, in which case, what is the point of naming aesthetic properties as we do? We found that terms used in aesthetic description must have their normal meanings.⁸

The aesthetic realist wants to be realistic about those properties which we describe metaphorically, as well as about properties which we describe as "beautiful," "elegant," or "dainty." If this road is blocked, the realist is faced with an unforeseen and uncomfortable dichotomy among aesthetic judgments. It turns out that in at least some important cases, the sentences do not describe aesthetic facts or states of affairs.⁹

2 AESTHETIC THOUGHT AND AESTHETIC LANGUAGE

2.1 This looks like a powerful argument. How should the aesthetic realist respond? In this section, I present a short-term solution and I then defend it. In section 3, I provide a deeper diagnosis.

I do not recommend denying the Davidsonian doctrine that the words used in metaphorical contexts have no more than the meaning that they have normally. The realist should *agree* with this. Now, Davidson has a posi-

7. What is the music sad about? What would delicate music be like if it were broken?

8. Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, p. 44.

9. Notice, however, that the nonrealist will also have to say something about metaphorical aesthetic descriptions and the way in which they relate to nonmetaphorical aesthetic descriptions. But this will not create the same metaphysical problem that it creates for the realist.

tive account of metaphor as well as a negative account. The positive account stresses pragmatic force, as opposed to sense or meaning; in particular, he focuses on what a metaphor makes us notice. It is therefore open to the aesthetic realist to say that what a metaphor makes us notice in aesthetic contexts, as opposed to what it means, is a real aesthetic property, and that this noticing is an intentional state which represents aesthetic facts or states of affairs.

This amounts to querying the "linguistic turn." We should *admit* the thesis of meaning equivalence on the linguistic level, while *denying* it on the level of thought. Although the *sentence* in which the word "delicate" figures means the same in aesthetic contexts as it usually does, the *thought* it expresses is quite different. The thoughts are different in that they employ different concepts. In the aesthetic use of the word, our thought has a realistic aesthetic content that it lacks in the nonaesthetic use. Let us introduce subscripts to mark the difference. The concepts delicacy_{NA} and delicacy_A might both be expressed using the English word "delicacy." When Scruton argues that music does not really move and that it is not really sad, the realist can reply that although 'move_{NA}' and 'sad_{NA}' do not apply to music, 'move_A' and 'sad_A' do apply to it.

2.2 It will be objected that it is too mysterious to make such a cleavage. Surely the two uses cannot be pulled apart in this way; for the point of the aesthetic use of such a word is rooted in its usual nonaesthetic use. Why else use the same word? It looks as if we have escaped from the first horn of Scruton's dilemma only to be impaled on the second.

There is something in this complaint. It would certainly be objectionable if the realist implied that the two concepts were completely unconnected—like the financial and fluvial senses of the word "bank." But there is a way that this unpleasant consequence can be avoided: on a realistic account, the connection would be a *causal* one. Acquiring the aesthetic concept would be causally dependent on possessing the nonaesthetic concept. We need to keep the two concepts separate, but not *too* separate. A causal relation achieves this nicely. That there is *some* significant semantic gap at *some* level is plausible.¹⁰ After all, we verify the two judgments in quite different ways. We would not strike a Ming vase with a hammer in order to find out whether or not it is delicate_A! We can hold that there is a semantic gap between thoughts

10. If we are talking about sadness_A and delicacy_A, then the questions of footnote 7 do not arise. But if we are talking about sadness_{NA} and delicacy_{NA}, then they do arise because the sadness_{NA} and delicacy_{NA} of music have the same conceptual connections as the sadness of a human being or delicacy of a Ming vase.

employing the concept of delicacy_A and thoughts employing the concept of delicacy_{NA}, but we can preserve some connection between the two thoughts since we can hold that we could not have come to possess the concept of delicacy_A unless we already possessed the concept of delicacy_{NA}. On a causal account, the two uses of the word "delicacy" would be separate, but not wholly unrelated.

There is clearly more to be said about the exact causal role that the non-aesthetic concept of delicacy_{NA} might play in the acquisition of the aesthetic concept of delicacy_A. I shall say more about this below. So far, all I have done is to gesture in the causal direction. There are problems to be dealt with. Not any causal relation will do. But there is no reason to think that such a story is doomed to failure from the start. The availability of such a causal account enables the realist to evade the second horn of Scruton's dilemma.

2.3 It might be replied that when Scruton talks about metaphorical transference in his essay "Understanding Music," he is referring to a phenomenon at the level of *thought*, not just at the level of *talk*.¹¹ He claims that in our very experience of music, the same concepts are employed as in non-aesthetic contexts, only they are not used to ascribe properties. Metaphoricalness is said to infect how we *hear* music, not just what we *say* about it. So surely, his argument cannot be met as I have suggested.

This reply would not be to the point. Scruton's essay "Understanding Music" was written almost ten years after the book *Art and Imagination*; and his employment of the idea of metaphorical transference in the essay goes, in one respect, beyond what he wrote in the book, and in another respect not as far. In the book, we have the observation that there is a great deal of metaphorical description in aesthetics, plus an argument against realism based on that observation. In the essay, Scruton's account of musical understanding in terms of metaphorical transference is, in fact, a development of his brand of nonrealism about aesthetics. There is no longer an *argument* against realism to worry about.

2.4 Malcolm Budd, in his essay "Understanding Music," criticized Scruton's essay of the same name for moving from the "uncontroversial thesis" that "There is more to the perception of melody, rhythm and harmony in a succession of sounds than the perception of the succession of sounds" to the positive and "problematic thesis" of "metaphorical transference." Budd is correct to notice that this is an extra step, over which Scruton sometimes

11. Roger Scruton, "Understanding Music," in *The Aesthetic Understanding* (London: Carcanet, 1983).

slides. Budd then asserts a different nonrealist view of music when he says that "rhythm is a sensational, not a representational, property of the experience of a musical work."¹² Budd's view may be coherent (depending on exactly what is meant by a "sensational" property) and he may also be able to explain Scruton's uncontroversial thesis. But he provides as little positive argument for his "sensational" theory as Scruton does for his problematic thesis of metaphorical transference. Argument is needed by both Scruton and Budd because the uncontroversial thesis can also be explained on a realist account, since the representation of melody, rhythm, and harmony, in an experience, would be a different sort of representation from the representation of a succession of sounds (even though *what* they represented might be one and the same).¹³ Both Scruton's and Budd's essays are full of important insights, but neither gives aesthetic realism a decent run for its money.

2.5 There may be some aspects of Davidson's view of metaphor which are in tension with my suggestion that we should locate a difference of meaning at the level of thought, not talk. Davidson writes: "there is no limit to what a metaphor calls our attention, and *much* of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character."¹⁴ Davidson's example of someone who "mentions the beauty and deftness of a line in a Picasso etching" suggests that he thinks that what metaphorical *aesthetic* descriptions make us notice is *both* unlimited *and* nonpropositional. I agree with the former but not the latter. For if, as Davidson says, "Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact,"¹⁵ why not an aesthetic fact? Why should aesthetics not be one of the exceptional cases where what we notice *is* propositional in character? The same-meaning doctrine about words is one thing, the nonpropositional view of what we notice is another. The nonpropositional view may be correct in many cases, without being correct in aesthetics. (We can reject a nonpropositional view of what aesthetic metaphors cause us to notice, even though we might want to agree with Davidson that what they make us notice is *unlimited*. These ideas are separate.)

12. Malcolm Budd, "Understanding Music," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 59 (1985): 241, 244.

13. Budd says that Scruton's uncontroversial thesis is sufficient to show that "melody, harmony and rhythm are not representational properties of musical experience" (*ibid.*, p. 244).

14. Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," p. 263, my emphasis.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

3 INEFFABLE AESTHETICS

3.1 No metaphor worth its salt admits of a literal paraphrase. This is no less true of aesthetic metaphors. The realist must claim that the content of the noticing which the metaphor causes cannot be stated without metaphor. For the properties that the metaphor draws our attention to cannot be described nonmetaphorically. It may be that what realizes that aesthetic property can be described in purely physical terms. But so long as we are giving an aesthetic description of the aesthetic properties of a thing, the use of metaphor is ineliminable; the metaphor is essential. This is what, parodying John Perry, we might call "the problem of the essential metaphor." Most metaphors are not essential in this way. Although ordinary metaphors cannot be paraphrased, the content of the noticing which they cause *can* be stated without metaphor. In this respect aesthetic metaphors differ from ordinary metaphors.

3.2 However, what we have said so far is not sufficient. We need a deeper diagnosis. We can see Scruton's argument as challenging us to *explain* the ineliminability of metaphorical description. Is it not mysterious to postulate forms of thought which are incapable of literal expression?

To relieve the difficulty, we need to notice that the issue that troubles us in aesthetics also looms large in the description of the phenomenology of inner experience. We are *driven* to use metaphor when we try to describe "what it's like" to be in certain qualitative mental states. Our use of metaphor in describing a pain as "stabbing" or "grinding" is ineliminable.¹⁶ Beyond a certain point—simply describing the pain as "pain"—we cannot express our thought nonmetaphorically. We could invent further classifications of pain; we could artificially construct pain-types (pain₁, pain₂, and so on.). But there will always be a residue which is not literally describable. Metaphor is not ineliminable in the sense that the object or event which is a pain cannot be described without metaphor. A particular pain might be identical with a particular brain event, and we can describe *that* nonmetaphorically. But *properties* of the pain are another matter. The felt or phenomenological properties of pain are literally indescribable. They can only be described metaphorically. And the contents of our thoughts about pain cannot be linguistically expressed without metaphor. When we think of a particular pain, we can

16. See Russell Hoban's novel *Kleinzeit* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974) for some superb, imaginatively metaphorical descriptions of pain. See also Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

think of its exact qualitative character directly, without the aid of metaphor. But the content of such a thought cannot be expressed in language without metaphor. Similarly, in trying to describe the smell of coffee, we run up against the limits of literal language. Thought, however, is not so bound. We can think of the smell of coffee without difficulty.

3.3 It is no accident that aesthetic descriptions and descriptions of the phenomenology of inner experience both manifest the same phenomenon of essential metaphoricalness. What both have in common is subjective grounds, in Kant's sense: such judgments are based on an inner response or feeling.¹⁷ The aesthetic realist can appeal to the ineliminability of our use of metaphor in describing inner experience as a "companion in guilt." We can respond to Scruton's challenge to explain the ineliminability of aesthetic metaphorical descriptions by saying that it arises from the subjective nature of aesthetic judgment.¹⁸ The reason that aesthetic descriptions of objects and events are essentially metaphorical is that descriptions of aesthetic *experience* are essentially metaphorical. And the reason that descriptions of aesthetic experience are essentially metaphorical is that, quite generally, descriptions of the phenomenology of inner experience are essentially metaphorical (beyond an initial classification as pain or pleasure or whatever). This is one reason why the same problem does not afflict moral philosophy; for moral judgments are not subjective in Kant's sense.¹⁹

Imagine a philosopher who began with the ineliminability of metaphor in the description of the phenomenology of inner experience and who then tried to mount an argument parallel to Scruton's against realism about the qualitative character of those experiences. We would not be impressed. The essentially metaphorical nature of our description of the phenomenology of inner experience does not supply the slightest encouragement for nonrealism about experience. When we think of the exact phenomenological quality of an experience, our thought can only be expressed metaphorically, but we are nonetheless thinking of a genuine property of experience. It is just that the content of such thought defies any literal expression. Similarly, it

17. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), pp. 41–42.

18. See chapter 2.

19. Another area where metaphor is essential and ineliminable is some parts of religion. The classic work on metaphor and religion is, of course, Moses Maimonides' great work *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956). However, this is hardly an uncontroversial area to which the aesthetic realist can appeal. In addition, it would not be the existence of some supposed religious experience which would explain the ineliminability of religious metaphors.

may be that our thought about certain aesthetic properties, or our experience of them, can be linguistically expressed only by means of metaphor. But it might be that the properties which such metaphors cause us to notice are real and that the noticing has realistic aesthetic content. Thus, the essentially metaphorical nature of much aesthetic description does not endanger a realistic interpretation of aesthetic judgment and experience.²⁰

This is mysticism, I admit. My view is that there are some aspects of the *world* which cannot be described without metaphor, for I think that the world has properties that are literally indescribable. And I think that *thoughts* about those properties cannot be linguistically expressed without metaphor. I am unrepentantly embracing the idea of thought content which outruns the possibility of direct literal expression in language.²¹ The impossibility is one which derives from the nature of the properties; it does not spring from some contingent limitation of human beings which might one day be remedied.

3.4 This, then, is why aesthetic description is prone to be metaphorical. Given this diagnosis, Scruton's argument to antirealism can be blocked. There is another bonus. The diagnosis helps us to fill in a little more of the causal story of aesthetic concept acquisition.

Assuming the more general principle of the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment, it is plausible that if one judges that something is delicate_A, then it must have looked or sounded delicate_A. The concept of delicacy_A must enter into the content of such experiences. And in order to have the experience of seeing or hearing its delicacy_A, one must possess the concepts of delicacy_A. Experiencing its delicacy_A stands to the ascription of the property of delicacy_A, just as, according to Kant, disinterested pleasure stands to the judgment of beauty or taste. Now, according to the causal story, the concept of delicacy_A must have its causal origin in the concept of delicacy_{NA}. The intermediate step between possessing the two concepts would be the acquisition of the notion that something *looks* or *sounds* delicate_{NA}. One can experience something *as* delicate_{NA} without believing that it is. Something can look or sound delicate_{NA} to us even though we know that it is not. Notice that while the judgment that something really is delicate_{NA} is not a subjective judgment,

20. The fact that science sometimes employs metaphorical descriptions in no way compromises a realistic interpretation of scientific descriptions. I cannot see why George Lakoff and Mark Johnson think it does in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

21. A certain confused linguistic behaviorism in the philosophy of mind would be one source of resistance to this idea.

the judgment that something looks or sounds delicate_{NA} *is*. So the step from judgments of what looks or sounds delicate_{NA} to the aesthetic judgment of delicacy_A is not such a large one: we are stepping from one subjective judgment to another.

This is intended to be no more than a suggestion. The idea is that one could not come to possess the aesthetic concept unless one already possessed the nonaesthetic concept. Aesthetic concepts which cannot be linguistically expressed without metaphor have their causal origin in ordinary concepts which can be linguistically expressed without metaphor. But this is only to isolate a *necessary* causal condition of possessing certain aesthetic concepts. I have said nothing about sufficient conditions. For that we need to consider broader issues. Filling in more details of the causal story would require a general account of the psychology of aesthetic judgment. However, I have said enough to deal with one problem: possessing one concept may be causally dependent on possessing another where we feel no temptation to use the same word to express the two concepts. But we can see why it is natural to use the same word to pick out aesthetic and nonaesthetic concepts of delicacy: given the ineliminability of aesthetic metaphor, there is no other.

CODA

To sum up: the realist should initially meet Scruton's meaning-equivalence argument by retreating to a meaning-difference at the level of thought. The same word with the same conventional linguistic meaning serves to express quite different concepts. But this move needs to be supplemented by a plausible causal account of the connection between the possession of the two concepts. The realist should deny that what aesthetic metaphors cause us to notice is nonpropositional. For, according to the realist, the noticing has realistic aesthetic content, and what is noticed is a range of genuine aesthetic properties. And—digging a little deeper—the realist can explain why the use of metaphors in aesthetic description is ineliminable in terms of the essentially subjective nature of aesthetic judgment. This essential subjectivity poses no special difficulty for the realist. And it gives us some help with filling in the causal account of aesthetic concept acquisition. The aesthetic realist can cope with metaphorical aesthetic descriptions.

What we cannot say literally, we need not pass over in silence.