

## CAN ONE BE A QUASI-REALIST ABOUT THE AESTHETIC?

CHRISTOPHER DOWLING

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

For ordinary judgements it is often the case that it may be justifiable to change one's mind given that others agree in holding an opposing view. In the case of judgements of beauty this is never the case; these are autonomous. Robert Hopkins has discussed the following (familiar) explanation: Judgements of beauty are not genuine *assertions* at all; rather they are *expressions* of some response or experience. Since to *acknowledge* the disagreement of others is not to *respond* to objects as they do, this acknowledgement needn't (nor could it) render it appropriate to change one's aesthetic judgement (Hopkins 2001: 166-189).

This kind of response would only be satisfactory were it able to account for another feature of our aesthetic discourse: that there can be genuine disagreements over beauty – that when these occur at least one party in the conflict has infringed on the norms at issue. In this context we see the attraction of a form of quasi-realism about beauty. However, Hopkins concludes that the quasi-realist account cannot be motivated. In the following analysis I want to re-open the debate with the suggestion that the quasi-realist has a potential explanation of the phenomena at issue and is able to avoid the criticisms Hopkins discusses. By shifting the onus of explanation away from the quasi-realist, I think we uncover something interesting about autonomous judgements in general.

## I. THE POSSIBILITY OF QUASI-REALISM

Hopkins draws the autonomous characterisation from Kant:

...[The judger] clearly perceives that the approval of others affords no valid proof, available for the estimate of beauty. He recognises that others, perchance, may see and observe for him, and that, what many have seen in one and the same way may, for the purpose of a theoretical, and therefore logical judgement, serve as an adequate ground of proof for him, albeit he believes he saw otherwise, but that what has pleased others can never serve him as the ground of an aesthetic judgment. The judgement of others, where unfavourable to ours, may, no doubt, rightly make us suspicious in respect of our own, but convincing us that it is wrong it never can.

*Critique of Judgement*, Part 1, §33

This autonomy of disinterested pleasure ensures that in the case of genuine conflict, one can't simply adopt the opposing judgement, for one must experience the disinterested pleasure oneself in order to make a genuine aesthetic judgement. However in such cases Kant thinks this *will* give cause to place *less confidence* in one's own view; in such cases one should, where possible, test the issue by re-examining the object. Yet, when one finds oneself disagreeing with several others who share a view for ordinary empirical matters this *can* be reason enough to adopt their view. The question thus raised by Hopkins is why this contrast holds (Hopkins 2001: 169). How could judgements of taste be autonomous as other judgements are not?

Hopkins suggests, following Crispin Wright (1992), that in standard cases empirical talk is subject to cognitive command: When disagreement arises it will be *a priori* that one side must lack warrant; that either my opponent or I will be at fault. I can then deploy fault considerations to find out which:

Fault Consideration: Since my opponents outnumber me; in general I and they are equally competent in matters of this sort; all have tried to access the facts in the same way - it is more likely that I am at cognitive fault than that they are.

Hence I ought to reject my view and accept theirs.

In constructing a plausible quasi-realism about the aesthetic Hopkins offers something analogous to cognitive command such that when conflict occurs one party will be at fault. Although this will not constitute *cognitive* fault it will still imply the

notion of warrant in capturing a violation of the norms governing our expressive discourse with genuine judgements of taste. For such norms we appeal to Kant's notion of the pure, disinterested judgements of taste. For he does hold it to be *a priori* that when conflicting judgements of taste are made, either one party is expressing an interested pleasure, or one is unintentionally making a judgement of dependant beauty (and thus expresses a pleasure based on the application of concepts). So we have a structural analogue to cognitive command on the expressivist picture, and thus a form of quasi-realism.

## II. AGAINST QUASI-REALISM

Of course I reported that Hopkins argues *against* the viability of a quasi-realist account – here is his basic argument. Given this quasi-realist account, Hopkins believes the following two 'fault allocating' arguments - (A) as applicable in the case of non-aesthetic judgements, (B) as applicable in aesthetic cases – to be formally on a par. Each justifies, the quasi-realist should admit, a change of mind given the fault considerations. Hopkins believes it is *this* that casts doubt on the ability of any form of quasi-realism to explain aesthetic autonomy.

Argument A:

- (1a) I and my opponents disagree over whether  $p$
- (2) One of us is at fault
- (3) They outnumber me, in general I and they are equally competent in matters of this sort, and we've all tried to access the facts in the same way.
- So
- (4) It is likely that I am at fault.
- So
- (5a)  $p/\neg p$  [i.e. whichever claim the opponents make]

Argument B:

- (1b) I and my opponents disagree over whether O is beautiful
- (2) One of us is at fault
- (3) They outnumber me, in general I and they are equally competent in matters

of this sort, and we've all tried to access the facts in the same way.

So

(4) It is likely that I am at fault.

So

(5b) O is beautiful/ It is not the case that O is beautiful [i.e. whichever claim the opponents make]

Hopkins holds that the quasi-realist must accept - given (A) - that an argument of this form can justify, in the aesthetic context, someone in the move from (1)-(4). In so doing one will become (as was hoped) more cautious and willing to try the matter by experiencing the disputed object anew. Under the quasi-realist's commitment to expressivism, one should be protected from the pressure to move from (4) to (5) if one lacks the appropriate response to the object in question. However, Hopkins objects that it is not clear why this should be so. Argument (B), in reflecting the form of (A), *does* commit the judger to a change of mind in the aesthetic case. We would expect the quasi-realist to be committed to the view that expressive claims *can* play a role in cogent arguments, so we should expect the conclusion to follow. In light of this commitment Hopkins does not believe the quasi-realist can have anything to say to explain or to save autonomy (for discussion see Hopkins 2001: 181-5).

### III. A RESPONSE TO HOPKINS

I think the quasi-realist is able to secure a viable interpretation of (B). I am going to suggest that Hopkins's argument (B) leads to a weaker conclusion about probability. It doesn't, nor should it, appear as an analogue of (A) but as a diversion from (A), so my main purpose in the following is to bring out the nature of this difference. By discussing the reason for this divergence I hope to motivate acceptance of the kind of move I suggest.

Given the reliance on various assumptions in the fault consideration (3) the conclusion in (4) can be no stronger than 'It is *likely* that I am at fault'. Anything more forceful in the light of (1)-(3) would not be warranted. This likelihood is based on the assumption that the 'force of many' is constituted by their being of equal competency to the lone judger; having used the same methods to reach their judgements etc. But if in the face of such conflict one can conclude only that 'It is likely that I am at fault', one might expect the *likelihood* locution to carry over into (5b) also. The strength of

the final step is derived from the *a priori* nature of (2) and the subsequent issue of warrant that arises. Yet it is surely possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false so we can't expect *deductive* validity here. The move to a conclusion presented in terms of likelihood appears motivated by the inductive feel to the argument. As such (B) might be more appropriately construed as follows:

Argument B'

(1b') I and my opponents disagree over whether O is beautiful

(2) One of us is at fault

(3) They outnumber me, in general I and they are equally competent in matters of this sort, and we've all tried to access the facts in the same way.

So

(4) It is likely that I am at fault.

So

(5b') It is likely that O is beautiful/ It is likely that it is not the case that O is beautiful [i.e. whichever claim the opponents make].

This argument offers a form of quasi-realism by embracing Hopkins' notion of fault consideration in (B) but offering instead a weaker analogue to the assertoric force found in (5b). But what *does* the conclusion to (B') mean? Although it might be thought clumsy or incoherent this is explained by the fact that it does not express a genuine assertion, merely (at best) a quasi-assertion.<sup>1</sup> Incoherence might be thought to issue from the judger's retained autonomy in the light of the move to (5b'). However, despite appearances it is not incoherent to hold that one judges that O is beautiful whilst tentatively conceding (5b') that it is *likely* that it is not the case that O is beautiful. The former is a judgement of taste, the latter a concession to personal fallibility in light of this new evidence. The reason that this is not incoherent is that this is precisely the state one would be in if, having expressed a judgement, one found cause not to reject, but merely to be suspicious of it; cause to re-examine the object afresh. Remember, as Kant maintains:

---

<sup>1</sup> I merely stipulate the use of this terminology. While it may be held that (5b') is assertoric (for example in the sense explained below) it is not an assertion concerning judgements of taste and thus not the kind of assertion that need be worrying in the present discussion of autonomy.

The judgement [of taste] of others, where unfavourable to ours, may no doubt, make us suspicious in respect of our own...

*Critique of Judgement*, Part I, §33

Indeed this characterisation adds legitimacy to (B') in showing that it is not merely an argument that explains *autonomy* in the aesthetic case, but one that accounts for the other features Kant maintained. It explains that, while autonomy should be maintained (given the requirement that a judgement be made only by one who *feels* the relevant response to O), opposing judgements will not be met with complacency.<sup>2</sup> (B') does this by explaining precisely what change the lone judger will have undergone in moving (in the face of opposition) to (5b'). Whilst holding on to his judgement, he will be committed to a state in which the quasi-assertion (5b') is appropriately attributable. He should maintain his response to O but place less confidence in that response. To 'place less confidence' in a view can thus be understood as continuing to maintain the judgement whilst having cause to re-examine the object of that judgement. It is difficult to see how else we *could* interpret such features.

Given the force of 'it is likely that' seemed more appropriately comparable to 'it is likely that' statements in the conclusions of *inductive* arguments, a better phrase might be 'It is *possible* that'. This, as a reading of (B) *would* decrease the logical force of the argument; I find this entirely appropriate given the characterisation offered. But this suggests that (B'), as it stands, isn't quite in the form we are after.<sup>3</sup>

Hopkins holds that the kind of move I suggest in offering (B') is not available to the quasi-realist (Hopkins (2001): 181). This is because he believes (A) and (B) to be formally parallel. In rejecting the final steps in (B), I seem to reject the parallel move in (A) but this would undermine the possibility of *any* form of fault allocating argument. If I am to offer a viable account I need to show how the quasi-realist can hold onto (B') whilst also accepting the validity of (A). I need to show that it is possible to explain how deferring to others' opinions *can* be acceptable.

To make this move I want to return to the differing weight of the 'likelihood' locution expressed in each argument. While issues of warrant will be raised in both (A)

<sup>2</sup> Thus we acknowledge and accommodate the phenomena discussed above.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew McGonigal has recently argued that Hopkins's argument is crucially enthymematic, though his revisions and aims differ slightly from my own. As I wish merely to open up discussion, I do not comment on McGonigal's article here. See his 'The Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46:4 (2006): 331-348

and (B), 'It is likely that I am at fault' will only carry weight in proportion to the assumptions qualifying the *type* of cases under consideration. In (A) we are taken all the way to the *judgement* whereas in (B) we conclude only that it is *possible* that I am at fault, but go no further. What distinguishes these arguments seems to be the state one is supposed to be in for (1a) and the state referred to in (1b). Presumably if 'I and my opponents disagree over whether *p*' then (say) I assert that *p* and they assert that  $\neg p$ . However on the expressivist reading of (B) or (B') my assertion is not formed on the basis of a cognitive state, nor need it be in constructing the quasi-realist analogue to cognitive command. Whether O is beautiful or not depends on the response I *feel* towards O. But, judgements that report feelings are (in a sense) infallible in a way that empirical beliefs needn't be. Furthermore empirical beliefs *can* be formed on the basis of inference or testimony rather than experience. This distinction seems to be a contender for explaining why one could move to (4) and (5) (or their analogues) in the case of certain empirical judgements but not in the case of aesthetic judgements. One might be tempted to maintain in (A) a merely quasi-assertion (as I have put it) that it is *only likely* that (say)  $\neg p$ , but given our practice of belief formations for these kinds of judgements, such a tentative claim would appear dogmatic. In *some* cases it would be merely obstinate to retain one's former belief in the light of this fault consideration, and the assumptions entailed about *these* judgements and their formation. The fault consideration about these judgements *will* allow me to defer from my previously held belief to one that is based on the testimony of others. This is because such a move can constitute a legitimate kind of judgement formation for these kinds of assertion. The subjectivity of one's feelings, on the other hand, should give a *prima facie* reason to hold on to them even in the face of adversity. More importantly the constraints on the *formation* of judgements that report feelings will justify the preservation of autonomy in the kind of cases under consideration.

Hopkins might claim to have anticipated this strategy: 'This is to accept that there are genuine fault allocating arguments with statements of the form 'O is beautiful' as conclusion, but to deny that those conclusions are judgements of taste.' (Hopkins (2001): 183). Whilst I am certainly denying that the conclusion constitutes a judgement of taste I'm not convinced we've yet got to a genuine fault allocating argument. Perhaps I can clarify with an example. Consider that *p* in the first argument is '*this surface is blue*'. Whilst coming to believe that it is likely that the surface is in fact red might not stop it continuing to appear that the surface is blue, what one

recognises in this kind of case is that it can be rational to use something other than one's own vision (i.e. we can implement the testimony of others, based on *their* vision) to form one's judgement. Here we have a consideration which legitimises the move from (3) and (4) to *the judgement* (5a) not just an attitude about one's initial judgement. The consideration is that for belief formation regarding observable phenomena it can be acceptable to rely on testimony. Hopkins claims that reluctance to move to the opposing judgement would reveal a vicious circularity if the only reason one can give to disallow the formation of a judgement based on testimony in certain cases is that the expressivist interpretation of these kinds of judgements forbids it. The onus is on the proponent to explain why yielding to the testimony of others, in just these cases, will not do.

The force of Hopkins' objection comes from the claim that the quasi-realist needs to accept the standard argument for non-aesthetic cases whilst motivating a block to the conclusion in aesthetic cases. However it is not clear that arguments of the form of (A) *are* standard. If this can be shown, the onus is no more on the quasi-realist to explain a 'non-standard' result, than it is on Hopkins to motivate the 'standard' interpretation. What is more, appeal to the nature of the judgements in question does seem to bring out the crucial difference the quasi-realist requires, for it is appeal to the nature of the judgements in (A) that brings out the characterisation that Hopkins takes as standard. This becomes apparent when one notes that autonomy isn't only present in cases where the judgements concerned are purportedly expressive. Consider the following cases: I'm in the final round of a game show; I believe the speedboat is behind *door number two* all the audience think not. Or, I believe that God exists and my opponents believe that He does not.<sup>4</sup> It is plausible in both cases to think that there is a fact of the matter; one of us is at fault. We are all equally competent in such matters having accessed the matter in the same way. (1) – (3) are satisfied but this doesn't suggest a move to (4) for it is not, now, likely that I am at fault; it does not legitimize the change in belief of (5).<sup>5</sup>

What distinguishes all the cases I have discussed is *the way these kinds of judgements are formed*. If we are talking about judgements formed on the basis of

---

<sup>4</sup> I suggest this example in response to those who might think that *guessing* in the game show case does not amount to a genuine assertion or belief that *p*. I think this could be finessed - I'm going to have to act on my decision eventually! Hopkins also mentions plausible parallels to aesthetic autonomy in comedic and moral cases (Hopkins 2001: 186).

<sup>5</sup> What it might make me do is return to the situation under consideration. Do they know something I don't? Have I understood the rules? Am I making my judgement in the appropriate way?

perceptual ability; on the basis of guess-work; on faith; or judgements of taste, this affects whether (3) makes it likely that I am at fault – whether there is a move to (4) - and this question is prior to questions of the relative merits of other means of judgement formation that might be available. I needn't even consider the possibility of yielding to the testimony of the masses if I do not take the situation to entail that my position lacks warrant. In this sense it does not appear that the onus is on the quasi-realist or expressivist to explain why judgements of taste cannot be formed on the basis of testimony, this *is* a question to be answered but first one needs a clearer conception of the kinds of things, other than fault, that can explain divergence.<sup>6</sup>

I'm suggesting that the fault allocating argument is, as it stands, incomplete, one needs to recognise the kinds of judgements under consideration as this will change whether or not an argument of the form of (A) is appropriate. While it is true that any account of autonomy needs to explain what it is about the type of judgements in question that differentiates them from judgements like '*this surface is blue*', showing that autonomy is not just a peculiarity of the aesthetic or expressive judgement seems to be enough to motivate a continued interest in the project of developing a quasi-realism about the aesthetic. That such judgements might require a certain response from the judger that is only achieved through acquaintance with the object would be precisely the kind of thing that blocks any move beyond (1)-(3) regarding the judgement formed; though as the quasi-realist can show, a different argument might progress with regard to other things, such as the attitude one has towards one's judgement.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, (as it appears with the game show or God case) I and my opponents might differ in our responses merely because there is no epistemic transparency for the formation of judgements in the situation as described. McGonigal discusses the role of epistemic access in fault allocating arguments in (2006: 336).

<sup>7</sup> I'm grateful to Michael Wilby for insightful discussion on an earlier version of this paper.

REFERENCES

- HOPKINS, R. (2001) 'Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement' *European Journal of Philosophy* 9:2: 166-189.
- KANT, I. (1952) *Critique of Judgement*, (trans.) J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- MCGONIGAL, A. (2006) 'The Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46:4: 331-348.
- WRIGHT, C. (1992) *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.