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The Riddle of Aesthetic Principles

The problem of aesthetic principles and that of the nature of aesthetic reasons get confronted. If aesthetic reasons play an important role in our aesthetic evaluations and judgments, then both some general aesthetic principles and rules could support them (aesthetic generalism) or again their nature may be particularistic (aesthetic particularism). A recent argument in support of aesthetic generalism as proposed by Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar is presented and criticized for its misapprehension of particularism. Their position of irreversible aesthetic generalism is questioned. Aesthetic particularism is restated by the help of proposals by Jonathan Dancy's version of moral particularism.

Key words: aesthetic principles, reasons, aesthetic generalism, aesthetic particularism, moral particularism, thick and thin properties

The basic aim of this paper is a defence of aesthetic particularism against arguments recently put forward by Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar in their paper "Aesthetic Principles" (2003). This defence involves a multi-fold strategy, which consists in arguing that (i) Conolly and Haydar misinterpret aesthetic particularism and consequently their arguments miss their mark; (ii) their proposed account of irreversible aesthetic generalism is not a promising solution to the riddle of aesthetic principles; and (iii) properly restated Dancy-style aesthetic particularism avoids their arguments against particularism and is thus a plausible option.

Our departure are basic solutions regarding reasons and the role of principles established in moral particularism. Moral particularism may be briefly characterized as a view that opposes moral principles (and rules), claiming that moral value and the rightness of acts, persons, situations, etc. depend on morally important features or reasons that are present in a particular situation. One cannot once and for all define a set of features and properties of our actions that are or would always be morally relevant and that would count as reasons. Our

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moral judgment must follow each particular situation that we encounter and it has to sort out the features and properties that are morally important in each particular case. We also have to judge which ones of these are more important than others. Moral particularism argues for holism of reasons – moral reasons essentially depend on context in the sense that all of them are capable of being altered by changes in context.¹ From this it follows that “the possibility of moral thought and judgement (and in general, one might say, of moral distinctions) in no way depends on the provision of a suitable set of moral principles.” (Dancy 2004, 82) We must therefore look for moral reasons and for justification of our moral judgments in other places.

The same problem regarding the relationship between reasons and principles may be observed in the area of aesthetic judgments. Here too, we are confronted with a question about the way in which aesthetic reasons support our aesthetic judgments of works of art and the role of aesthetic principles. The picture figuring possible solutions is similar. One can view particularism as a broader strategy that can extend to other normativity based areas.² Jonathan Dancy claims that *holism of reasons* holds for all sorts of reasons and hence also for aesthetic reasons. (Dancy 2004, 75-76) In support of moral particularism he developed several solutions to problems of moral metaphysics, justification, consistency, reasoning and judgment. We will try to incorporate this structure and solutions into the area of aesthetic reasons while addressing arguments against particularism.

I. The riddle introduced³

Conolly and Haydar present the problem behind aesthetic principles in the form of an inconsistent triad of *prima facie* acceptable and commonsensical statements about our aesthetic judgments and evaluations. Let us take a closer look at their setting of the argument in support of irreversible aesthetic generalism

¹ Two basic claims of reason holism are: (1) what is a reason in one situation (context) may alter or completely lose its polarity in another, and (2) reasons present in a particular situation do not necessarily combine in a simple, additive way. According to Dancy these claims hold for theoretical and practical reasons. See Dancy 2000b.

² See Potrč and Strahovnik 2004.

³ The following section is mostly a sketch of the problem of aesthetic principles such as presented in Conolly and Haydar (2003).

and against aesthetic particularism. Consider the following triad of statements about aesthetic evaluations:

- (1) We give reasons for our judgments of works of art.
- (2) Reasons are inherently general, and hence dependent on principles.
- (3) There are no principles of aesthetic evaluation. (Conolly and Haydar 2003, 115)

This set of statements represents an inconsistent triad. So something has to go. Before considering what one would be more willing to give up let us try to provide some *prima facie* reasons for accepting each of the above statements separately.

ad (1) It seems that we are engaged in *giving reasons* when we aesthetically evaluate or judge certain works of art. We say things like: “The novel X is a great book with very vivid characters, colourful portraying of rural society and with inventive poetic language.”, “This building is elegant and stylishly structured.”, “The picture uses the contrast between symmetry and almost chaotic diversity of details to state a powerful message.”, etc. If we try to isolate the form of our evaluations we get the following general form:

“X is beautiful/great/good/ ... in virtue of its quality(ies)/feature(s) A (B, C, ...).”

The relation between certain features of X and its aesthetic value or quality is either explicitly stated or implicitly present in our aesthetic judgments.

ad (2) Reasons must be *general* for our judgments to be consistent, coherent and properly normatively supported. The relation between evaluative/aesthetic properties (E) of works of art and their grounding properties (G) must be universal, so that the principles of the form: $(\forall x) Gx \rightarrow Ex$ could appropriately support our judgments by fixing their truth or endorsability. It seems that if reasons would function holistically and change their valence from one case to another then the doors would be wide open for arbitrariness to enter our aesthetic evaluations. The only proper supports for reasons are *general aesthetic principles*.

ad (3) *Complexity* of aesthetic evaluation gives no room for strict, universal aesthetic principles. Furthermore we have a hard time even to think of any good and uncontroversial candidates for such principles that would not be susceptible to counter-examples. It does not seem that e.g. art critics could come

up with a definite, uncontroversial list of proper aesthetic principles. And if “absence of evidence is evidence of absence”, then there are no general aesthetic principles or rules.

Despite the intuitive *prima facie* appeal of each of the above three claims something has to go. If we deny (1) we end up in *illusionism*. Illusionism denies that we are giving reasons when asserting various aesthetic judgments; instead we are really just reporting on how we see the situation and try to get others to see it our way. If we oppose (2), we have taken the *particularistic* stance. And if we counter (3), we go *generalistic*.

- ~(1): ILLUSIONISM
~(2): PARTICULARISM
~(3): GENERALISM

Conolly and Haydar further distinguish between two kinds of aesthetic generalism: (a) *irreversible generalism*, which allows for no exceptions to general aesthetic principles and (b) *reversible generalism*, which allows for a certain range of exceptions to general aesthetic principles. They opt for the former, while claiming that the most prominent representative of the latter is Frank Sibley.⁴

Putting the position of illusionism aside, we get the following picture of aesthetic principles accounts:

aesthetic generalism		aesthetic particularism
irreversible	reversible	

Leaving behind the aesthetic puzzle we can now turn to the field of moral philosophy where we can discern a similar situation. This comparison is important for our purposes of trying to *restate aesthetic particularism* on the basis of solutions proper to *moral particularism*.

⁴ This claim can be disputed because one can interpret Sibley as a reversible generalist, pluralistic generalist or particularist, depending on an underlying interpretation of the relationship between his *prima facie* reasons, summary evaluative judgments of works of art and a holistic nature of interactions between reasons (overriding, undermining, reversibility). See Bender 1995, 382, Sibley 1962 and sections IV-V.

II. The riddle of moral principles

Here is a reformulated inconsistent triad of statements now changed so as to pertain to our moral evaluation of acts:

- (1') We give moral reasons for our moral judgments regarding acts, persons, situations, etc.
- (2') Reasons are inherently general and hence dependent on moral principles (rules, ideals or virtues).
- (3') There are no moral principles.

Let us try to make some statements about each of these new claims.

ad (1') We seem to be engaged in *giving reasons* when morally evaluating or judging acts, situations, persons, states of affairs, etc. We say things such as: "Mary's action was right because she helped the person in need", "This situation is morally intolerable because human life is not treated as something sacred.", "Mother Theresa was a good person in virtue of mercifully devoting her life to others who needed help.", etc. If we try to isolate the form of our evaluation we get the following general form:

"X is right/good in virtue of its quality(ies)/feature(s) A (B, C, ...)."

The relation between certain features of X and its moral value or quality could either be explicitly stated or implicitly present in our judgments.

ad (2') Reasons must be general for our judgments to be consistent, coherent and properly normatively supported. Architecture of morality is thus general. It seems that if reasons would function holistically and change their valence from one case to another then the doors would be wide open for unbearable arbitrariness to enter our moral evaluations. The only proper supports for moral reasons are *general moral principles* that connect non-moral and moral properties of moral evaluation objects.⁵ A moral person is a person of principle.

ad (3') The complexity of our moral life gives us no room for any strict moral principles and rules, furthermore we do not even have a clue about any good candidates for such principles. Most of the principles that moral philosophers thought of are susceptible to *counter-examples* and are plainly false in some

⁵ See Shafer-Landau (1997) for an informative analysis of the nature, function and scope of moral rules.

particular cases or are unable to account for moral dilemmas. The unique nature of every moral case or moral decision escapes a principle-based approach to morality. Hence there are no general moral principles or rules.⁶

Here are the positions that result from the negations of the above statements:

- ~(1'): MORAL ILLUSIONISM
(SKEPTICISM ABOUT MORAL REASONS)
- ~(2'): MORAL PARTICULARISM
- ~(3'): MORAL GENERALISM

And further, here is a standard picture regarding moral principles:

moral generalism		moral particularism
moral monism	moral pluralism	

The picture is slightly different in the case of ethics in respect to the case of aesthetics, since *moral pluralism* (which is built upon the notion of *prima facie* duties in the case of W. D. Ross) cannot be regarded as a position arguing for moral principles that would simply allow for exceptions (e.g. probabilistic principles). Ross *prima facie* duties are moral principles stating those features of actions that are always going to be morally relevant. According to moral pluralism a particular *prima facie* duty *A* could never alter or lose its polarity, though it may be overridden in a particular situation by other duties present.⁷

⁶ We must note that moral particularism is not simply a straightforward rejection of moral generalities, e.g. some inductive, explanatory or intra-ethical generalities could play a certain role in our moral lives; supervenience of moral upon non-moral also provides some general truths (but quite unlike any moral principles). Another type of particularism-friendly generalities are generalities based upon default nature of reasons. See Little 2000 and Dancy 2004 on this issue.

⁷ “When we think ourselves justified in breaking, and indeed morally obliged to break, a promise in order to relieve some one’s distress, we do not for a moment cease to recognize a *prima facie* duty to keep our promise, and this leads us to feel, not indeed shame or repentance, but certainly compunction, for behaving as we do, we recognize, further, that it is our duty to make up somehow to the promisee for the breaking of the promise.” (Ross 1930, 28)

III. An argument against particularism

Before going into a more detailed comparison between moral and aesthetic particularism and into the vindication of both let us briefly present Conolly and Haydar arguments for irreversible generalism as their proposed solution to the riddle of aesthetic principles.

In order to argue for irreversible generalism Conolly and Haydar have to provide arguments against illusionism, against particularism and against reversible generalism.

Against illusionism. Illusionism claims that there is no genuine and actual “reason giving” involved in our aesthetic judgment. Instead there is just the plain delivery of “directions of perceiving”⁸. The language involved is used only as a tool in order *to enable us to perceive a certain work of art in a certain way*. But one could argue that a critic must *appeal to some features* (regardless of the fact of their general or particular nature) when evaluating works of art and this means that she gives reasons for her aesthetic judgments. According to Conolly and Haydar both particularism and generalism should reject illusionism. Still, there is the question that poses itself: what drives the illusionist into her position? A probable answer is as follows: the rigid generalist position with its implausibility and the lack of other options concerning an account of the nature of aesthetic reasons. Maybe an illusionist would be happy to embrace aesthetic particularism when properly stated and defended.

*Against particularism.*⁹ Particularism opposes the claim that features of works of art have a *fixed valence*, for example that elegance is always a feature with a positive aesthetic valence. And by that particularism fails to explain

⁸ Despite not being willing to give up the talk of reasons, even particularism seems to be close to such a position. Consider the following passage from Dancy: “*To justify one’s choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation, starting in the right place and going on to display the various salient features in the right way; to do this is to fill in the moral horizon. In giving those reasons one is not arguing for one’s way of seeing the situation. One is rather appealing to others to see it [...] the way one sees it oneself, and the appeal consists in laying out that way as persuasively as one can.*” (Dancy 1993, 113) Conolly and Haydar also noticed this. See Conolly and Haydar 2003, 116-117.

⁹ Jonathan Dancy divides objections to moral particularism into two basic groups: (a) arguments from rationality, and (b) arguments from motivation. Conolly and Haydar’s aesthetic counterpart belongs within the former group. See Dancy 2001.

what we mean when we say things like: “A work of art *W* has aesthetic value *V* because of the property *X*”. Normative force of a reason could not emerge out of particular situation alone, since some (general) inherent connection between *X* and *V* is assumed in our judgment. The robust structure of Conolly and Haydar’s argument against particularism goes like this:

We expect our aesthetic judgments to be *consistent*.
Consistency is brought in only by general principles and rules.
Therefore aesthetic particularism is false.

But nothing is said what sort of consistency Conolly and Haydar have in mind here and in what way particularist could not satisfy this condition. If by consistency only the above mentioned inherent connection between a certain feature and aesthetic value leading to general principle is presupposed, then Conolly and Haydar are simply begging the question against particularism. Conolly and Haydar further support this argument by examples from ethics. They give the example of honesty as a valenced feature of an act with an irreversible positive polarity and with positive contribution in every case of its occurrence. On the other hand truthfulness (always saying the truth) is a non-valenced feature. We can therefore construct a general moral principle figuring honesty, while explaining away our particularist intuitions as ones pertaining to truthfulness. A particularist could reply that honesty is already a heavily morally laden feature (and it already contains a moral judgment of a situation), which therefore comes with a “default” positive polarity. Indeed there is a similar argument from consistency against moral particularism based upon the issue of consistency, but there is also a response to it.¹⁰ An appeal to ethics would not solve these matters.

¹⁰ Consider Dancy’s response: “*The first and most direct is that thinking rationally requires at least that one think consistently, and in ethics this just means taking the same feature to be the same reason wherever it occurs. Particularism, therefore, denies the rationality of moral thought. [...] The answer to the first is that, when we are thinking of reasons for belief, the sort of consistency required of us is merely that we do not adopt beliefs that cannot all be true together. Why should we understand the consistency requirement in a different way when we turn to moral reasons? Simply to insist that this is so must be to beg the question against particularism.*” (Dancy 2001, section 8). And we could add that the sense in which I judge a situation *S* as, e.g. morally valuable and would judge every exactly similar situation *S*’ as having the same moral value too, suffices for my judgments to be *consistent*.

The second objection to aesthetic particularism that Conolly and Haydar present is that particularism by building its position mainly via arguing against generalism actually attacks a *strawman*, a particularly *strict and implausible form of generalism*. While claiming that there are no general rules linking particular features of works of art and their aesthetic value, particularists often quote examples of rules such as “*a centrally positioned patch of yellow always contributes to the positive aesthetic value of a painting*”. But as it was already stated this kind of argumentation only establishes the implausibility of a very strict aesthetic generalism, which claims that *all* features mentioned in the explanation of our aesthetic judgments are reasons arising out of general exceptionless aesthetic principles.

Against reversible generalism. Reversible generalism opts for *aesthetic principles that allow for exceptions*. A generally positively valenced feature A can thus shift its valence in certain unusual circumstances. Principles of reversible generalism can therefore be seen as inductive or probabilistic, although there might be cases where this is not so.¹¹ Still some clear criteria are needed in order to specify features of works of art or of action that are valenced. Here for reversible generalism Sibley’s test of aesthetic polarity or reversibilist criterion of valence enters the picture.

Take a given feature *A*, and

(i) if (in normal circumstances) it does not require or call for explanation linked to a more ultimate or universal features of its aesthetic contribution, then we are facing a **valenced** or inherently charged feature (e.g. elegance, grace, garishness, sentimentality)

(ii) if in every circumstance it does require or call for explanation of its aesthetic contribution, then we are facing a **non-valenced** or inherently neutral feature (e.g. blue patch in the picture, a curved shape)¹²

Valenced features provide *prima facie* reasons for our aesthetic judgments since they carry some (positive or negative) inherent value. It is e.g. unintel-

¹¹ “*In some possible worlds, it would be better to lie more often than tell the truth. That would not detract from the notion that in general truth-telling is positively valenced, though its value in particular circumstances could be reversed by other factors, such as sensitivity to others, in which case truth-telling would be a moral defect.*” (Conolly and Haydar 2003, 119-120)

¹² See Dickie 1987, 234-235.

ligible to express judgments like “This work of art is not aesthetically valuable because it is elegant.” or “This work is good in virtue of its garishness.” Sibley can allow that valenced features sometimes fail to contribute their inherent value to the whole or even contribute the opposite value, but in that case there must always be a backup explanation of the situation that is linked to other valenced features present and their constellation.

For reversible generalism the mechanism of aesthetic contribution follows the “*organic wholes*” model, e.g. two positive features can in suitable circumstances lead to a widely negative contribution like in the case of dramatic intensity and humour. Conolly and Haydar argue that this package deal is highly implausible because of tensions between the *mechanism of contribution* (even valenced features can in some cases fail to contribute their default value), the *criteria of valence* (two basic sorts of features: valenced and non-valenced) and the need for an *explanation* of a contribution (contribution of a valenced feature needs explanation only in unusual cases where e.g. a generally positively valenced feature fails to contribute its value or where its contribution is negative, while the contribution of a non-valenced feature must always be backed up with an appropriate explanation). The overall explanation of the value of a work of art with some valenced and some non-valenced features consists in their interaction. This is so in cases where valenced features function normally as also in non-normal cases. So the very criterion of valence gets undermined by the need for an overall explanation.¹³

A defence of irreversible generalism. Conolly and Haydar argue for irreversible generalism in a very broad way, so that it is able to encompass a wide variety of aesthetic generalisms. There are at least two main options to this strategy: either aesthetic principles (and hence the relevance of features) are arranged in a *hierarchical order* of importance or again they are *pluralistic* in

¹³ However, there is another, possibly even more devastating argument against Sibley. It seems that the notion of a valenced feature (and the underlying test) contains some sort of isolation qualification. Inherent value of a given feature is located only in isolation from other features. But this tells us nothing about a contribution made at an overall level to the overall value of a work of art. It is possible that some features are only valuable and contribute their value when some other features are also present. Consider e.g. the case of originality; it seems that originality alone does not make a work of art aesthetically valuable and that some other aesthetically valuable feature must be present in order for originality to contribute its value. See also Dancy’s critique of “isolation approaches” in 2004, 19-20; 23-24.

their nature and hence they change their supremacy from one case to another.¹⁴ Valenced aesthetical properties such as elegance, grace, and depth always carry an irreversible polarity.

Before going on to criticize aesthetic generalism from the viewpoint of particularism we can point out that both, irreversible generalism and particularism, have at least two things in common. These common points involve the need for *reasons* and reason giving in our judgments (by referring to properties of works of art, object, acts, persons, etc.) and the need for a proper *explanation* of a given feature's contribution, about how its being stated as a reason enhances or decreases the value of the object of judgment.

IV. Against irreversible generalism

How could one reply to this move that leads into irreversible generalism, a position that links general aesthetic principles just to valenced aesthetical properties? What can we say about the combined picture of aesthetic reasons? *Prima facie* if some reasons are *particular* and some *general* (the reasons ranging over valenced aesthetical features)¹⁵ then irreversible generalism ends up with a “*dualistic*” picture of the nature of reasons that is very unappealing indeed. It is therefore better to go particularistic and explain away the seeming generality and constancy of some features and reasons by the usage of the particularistic notion of default reasons. As it turns out even the *softer forms of generalism* hide in themselves a strict *atomistic* nature. It is further not even clear at all whether valenced aesthetical properties could be a good basis for the formation of strict aesthetic principles, and what would the corresponding metaphysical picture of the relation between natural or non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties look like.

Let us now outline Conolly and Haydar position of irreversible generalism. They invite us to distinguish between two sorts of generalism:

¹⁴ Such aesthetic principles could follow the Rossian model of moral pluralism, which is build upon the concept of *prima facie* duty as the underlying notion of moral principles. See Ross 1930.

¹⁵ See Conolly and Haydar 2003, 122-125. It seems that their proposed theory cannot avoid this duality between general reasons and particular or holistic reasons, even though they let much space for numerous varieties of irreversible generalism (e.g. possibility of a hierarchical ranking of irreversible features).

- (i) *strong generalism* which claims that *all* features of works of art cited (as reasons) in criticism/aesthetic judgments must be supported by law-like aesthetic principles
- (ii) *weak generalism* which claims that *some* features of works of art cited (as reasons) in criticism/aesthetic judgments must be supported by law-like aesthetic principles.

In addition there is the second criterion for strictness of generalism, namely that of the stringency proper to such aesthetic principles; nonobstantly whether they admit of exceptions (reversible generalism) or not (irreversible generalism). So we get the following overall picture:

	strong	weak
irreversible	STRONG IRREV. GENERALISM	WEAK IRREV. GENERALISM
reversible	STRONG REV. GENERALISM	WEAK REV. GENERALISM

Conolly and Haydar argue for the weak and irreversible generalism as the only one that is able to meet the particularist challenge.

Weak irreversible generalism: Some features of works of art cited (as reasons) in criticism/aesthetic judgments are supported by lawlike aesthetic principles that do not allow for any exceptions.

But the question remains which features are such that they can be captured by exceptionless general rules. Conolly and Haydar answer that those are the ones that are unable to shift their valence. Here are some examples:

valenced features: *elegance, depth, economy, grace, intensity, delicacy, loveliness, vividness, brilliance, harmony, etc.*

non-valenced features: *short, red, big, curved, old, shadowy, clear, loud, etc.*

Nevertheless, since they do not offer either a definite list of such features¹⁶ nor a test for differentiating them, all they are left with is an unsupported claim that there are some such features. They could propose something like Sibley's test that was presented above, but we have already stressed the troubles and insufficiency of it.

There are at least two further problems associated with such a proposal. The first is the above-mentioned *duality of reasons*. If only valenced features were the ones that would contribute (in a simple additive and law-like way) to the aesthetic value of a work of art this generalistic proposal would then go through. But things get more complicated when we allow *other features* to enter the picture and to function as *aesthetic reasons* too. And Conolly and Haydar allow for this since they argue for weak generalism. About the relationship between the valenced and non-valenced feature they say the following.

"We do not deny that, in the process of criticism, we often point to non-valenced properties such as a blue patch or a curve. This is for the obvious reason that pointing to certain non-valenced properties (such as curves) may bring to light the presence of other, valenced properties (such as elegance). The same is true in ethics; evidence of truthfulness can support without, by itself, entailing honesty. Other non-valenced properties must be taken into account." (Conolly and Haydar 2003,124)

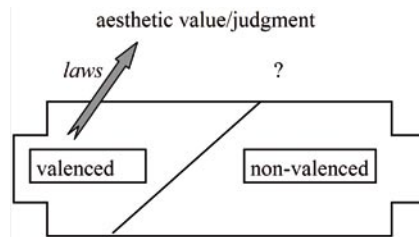
From this passage it might be concluded that for Conolly and Haydar the appeal to non-valenced features in our judgments only has a certain epistemic role. Hence only valenced features would be the ones that would be reasons in support of our judgments. But this would really bring their proposed account close to strong generalism. They continue:

"We thus go from the non-valenced overall character of an artwork to the ascription of valenced properties to it. We do not, as some particularist argue, go from the overall value of an artwork to the ascription of valenced properties to it." (Conolly and Haydar 2003,124)

But now it is very hard to see how general moral principles could support this ascription of valenced features, since an overall character of an artwork seems essentially particular.

¹⁶ Their proposal could be seen as something parallel to a restated Beardsley tripartite generalism stating unity, intensity and complexity as a complete set of irreversibly valenced features (or primary positive criteria) that determine aesthetic value of works of art. See Dickie 1987.

Returning to the Conolly and Haydar' duality of reasons, they seem to end up with two completely different sorts of reasons - one that are "genuine" aesthetic reasons properly supported by general aesthetic principles (as the second statement of the riddle stipulates), and the other, more "wobbly" sort of reasons that nevertheless contribute to the overall aesthetic value of works of art?¹⁷ How to account for this difference? It would be much more coherent if *all* aesthetic reasons would share one basic logic, either atomistic/general or holistic/particular and hence there will be no breach in our rationality of aesthetic reasons.¹⁸

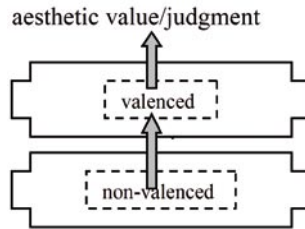


¹⁷ Imagine that some weak irreversible generalist comes up with a definite list of valenced features and corresponding aesthetic principles. Then pick one of these features (A) and further consider all possible aesthetically valuable objects that have exactly this feature A and none of the other on the list. It is an open question to what extent one would be able to explain or account for the aesthetic value of such objects and for differences between them in terms of this one general reason. My guess is that one would have to appeal to a lot of particular and holistic reasons that would support A. The majority of reasons would then be holistic and aesthetic particularist next move would be to explain the "general" reasons in a way that would incorporate them into an overall holistic picture of reasons. Particularism avoids these difficulties.

¹⁸ See Dancy 2000b and 2004, chap. V. for a similar argument regarding the nature of moral reasons. Here is a brief outline of his argument: the question of how reasons function from case to case is a basic question about the nature of rationality. If we allow for the possibility of a set of reasons that function atomistically or irreversibly and at the same time we hold that a majority of reasons are holistic (reversible, non-valenced) then we are stuck with a hybrid conception of rationality. We can avoid this by explaining away the seemingly atomistic nature of some reasons by other means. *"Invariant reasons, should there be any, will be invariant not because they are reasons but because of their specific content. [...] The invariance, where it occurs, derives not from the fact that we are dealing here with a reason, but from the particular content of that reason."* (Dancy 2004, 77) *"I suggest that the invariance of the reason is an epistemic matter rather than what one might call a constitutive one. If we know or even merely suspect that the reason functions invariantly, this tells us, or at least gives us some idea, how it is functioning here, but in no way constitutes the sort of contribution it makes to the store of reasons here present. In that sense, the invariance of its contributions is not a matter of the logic of such a reason."* (Dancy 2004, 78)

If we return to the relationship between valenced and non-valenced features figuring as reasons in support of our judgments, then the situation may be presented in the following manner:

What is the nature of this second relation from non-valenced features or non-valenced reasons to the aesthetic value of works of art and to our aesthetic judgments? How can it figure in constituting the aesthetic value? When confronted with the lack of answers to this question we can imagine a slightly different



picture; according to it the non-valenced features are at the bottom level. Valenced features supervene upon this bottom level and further they themselves are grounding properties of aesthetic value.

But here the problem of aesthetic value judgments just gets *transferred* to a lower level. There are no aesthetic principles linking non-valenced to valenced aesthetic features just as in the case of moral particularism there are no moral laws linking non-moral features to moral features of acts. As we saw earlier, this relation is essentially holistic and particular even by the lights of Conolly and Haydar. At best the weak irreversible generalist could find only some *intra-aesthetical principles*. Further, every *counter-example* to a seemingly valenced feature¹⁹ at the middle level knocks it down to the lower level. It seems that most of the features that are usually stated in criticism would be found exactly there, where they are left out from the reach of any help from the side of aesthetic principles. Due to the lack of conclusive arguments for irreversible aesthetic generalism and against particularism let us now try to remodel aesthetic particularism by the help of moral particularism.

¹⁹ A short time ago I was at a presentation of a novel *Dziewięć* (Nine) by a Polish author Andrzej Stasiuk. A literary critic argued that the merit of this work lies in a combination of lyrical sentimentality and brutality of description, which are both usually taken as aesthetical defect.

V. *Aesthetical particularism restated*

Here is a restatement of aesthetical particularism modelled upon the proposals that are at work in Jonathan Dancy's version of moral particularism.

(a) Aesthetical particularism:

Aesthetical particularism claims that the possibility of aesthetics in no way depends upon a provision of general and exceptionless aesthetic principles. Aesthetic value of works of art depends on aesthetically important reasons that are present in particular situation. One cannot once and for all define a complete set of features and properties of our actions that always are or would be aesthetically relevant and would count as reasons. Our aesthetic judgement must follow each particular situation that we encounter and seek out its features and properties that are aesthetically important in a particular case. It should also establish which of them are more important than others. Aesthetical particularism argues for holism of reasons – aesthetic reasons are essentially dependent on context.

(b) Holism of aesthetic reasons:

- (H₁) What is an aesthetic reason/ aesthetically relevant feature in one situation may alter or lose its polarity in another.²⁰
- (H₂) The way in which aesthetic reasons that are present here combine with each other is not necessarily determinable in any simple additive way.

(c) Metaphysics:

thin aesthetic property

↑ *constituency*

(+ *their inter-constellation*)

thick aesthetic properties

↑ *resultance*

natural properties

aesthetic properties/value

↑ *supervenience*

natural properties

²⁰ Note that holism stated in this way is rather weak regarding the modality. But it is widely cast since it ranges over all reasons. See Dancy 2004, 77.

(d) Epistemology:

To justify one's choice is to give the reasons one sees for making it, and to give those reasons is just to lay out how one sees the situation, starting in the right place and going on to display the various salient features in the right way; to do this is to fill in the aesthetic horizon. The persuasiveness here is the persuasiveness of a narrative: an internal coherence in the account, which compels assent. We succeed in our aim when our story sounds right. Aesthetic justification is therefore not subsumptive in nature, but narrative. (Dancy 1993, 113)

I propose to stop talking about valenced and non-valenced features of works of art and to start using the distinction between the *thin aesthetic features*, *thick aesthetic features* and physical/descriptive or simply *non-aesthetic features*. One can then use the model of moral particularism in order to shape the relations between these. If we look at the moral philosophy, thin moral properties are right, wrong, good, bad, morally permissible, etc. They behold very little content within them; just some highly abstract portrayal of moral value. Thick moral properties on the other hand are more contentfull (they combine descriptive together with evaluative or deontic), e.g. honest, caring, benevolent, generous, kind, humane, cruel, violent, sadistic, etc.

Examples of thin aesthetic properties would be properties like beautiful, aesthetically valuable, aesthetically appealing, ugly, without aesthetic value. Examples of thick aesthetic properties are the above listed valenced properties such as elegance, depth, economy, grace, intensity, delicacy, serenity, imaginativeness, etc. And there are physical/descriptive properties like short, red, noisy, loud, big, curved, old, square. It seems that there is a diverse variety of thick aesthetic features (and concepts) of different types: some closer to descriptive (sad, unified, ecstatic, symmetrical, etc.), others closer to evaluative (elegant, brilliant, exquisite, masterly, wonderful, etc.), some more broadly or secondary aesthetic (original, independent, etc.). The complexity of aesthetical field gives us slightly more vague borders between these categories as in the case of ethics. Nonetheless the basic classification idea is fairly clear.

According to the above proposal thick aesthetic properties *result*²¹ from descriptive level and their *shape* in the context then *determines* the thin aesthetic

²¹ Resultance does not exclude supervenience, since the two relations cover quite different ground. See Dancy's commentary of this point in his 2004, 85-93.

property or aesthetic value of work of art.²² The same picture can be used to explain the functioning of moral reasons and aesthetic reasons²³ and this is the basis for such holistic approach. In order to get to this however the whole-hearted particularism must be accepted. There is no arbitrariness in particular aesthetic judgments and the only proper support for them can be given by a rich and holistic background of reasons. The seeming irreversibility of some thick aesthetic features can be explained in a way that avoids the problematic dual nature of reasons.

“[W]e should accept the possibility of invariant reasons, so long as the invariance is not a matter of the logic of such reasons, but more the rather peculiar fact that some reasons happen to contribute in ways that are not affected by other features. We can admit this without adopting a hybrid theory of rationality, so long as we treat the invariance of any invariant reasons as an epistemic matter rather than as a constitutive. (Dancy 2004, 78)

So the invariance of some reasons is not a special problem for particularism. The fact that a reason functions invariantly does not constitute the *contribution* it makes *in a particular case*. One can even allow for some role of aesthetic principles (maybe as *rules of thumb* or reasons with *default polarity*), which could figure as the background enabling conditions in a particularistic picture of aesthetic reasons.²⁴

Now we have found a new solution to the riddle of aesthetic principles - a properly restated aesthetic particularism. The model of aesthetic particularism built upon the solutions established in the area of ethics asserts itself as a much stronger and intuitively plausible position than Conolly and Haydar presuppose and hence as a much more challenging target for attack from the side of aesthetic generalists.

²² This tells us a lot also about the seeming invariability of some reasons that are based upon thick features. It is not the case that a work of art is aesthetically valuable *because* it is e.g. elegant, but elegance itself includes a previously made aesthetic judgment in a particular case and thus overall aesthetic value is partially constituted by its being elegant. See Bender 1995, 384. The intuitions behind Sibley's test of aesthetic polarity thus arise out of this confusion.

²³ There can be also some dissimilarity, such as the epistemological question in respect to the aesthetic sense or taste, which is different from the epistemological question in respect to the moral sense.

²⁴ It should be noted that this is merely a rough sketch of aesthetic particularism that is open for further elaborations. It is not committed to any particular metaphysical account of aesthetic properties (e.g. response dependence theory) and does not exclude any particular account of aesthetic concepts.

We saw that the problem of aesthetic generalism actually lies in its atomistic conception of reasons. Hence no modification – either weak or strong, reversible or irreversible – is able to avoid the problems mentioned above. A proper account of aesthetic reasons should thus be thoroughly holistic. Dancy-style aesthetic particularism is one of such candidates.²⁵

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