

Entanglement and Non-Ontology

How Putnam clarifies the Link between Aesthetic and Ethical Value

Susana Cadilha and Vítor Guerreiro



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2783>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.2783

ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher

Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference

Susana Cadilha and Vítor Guerreiro, "Entanglement and Non-Ontology", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XIV-1 | 2022, Online since 13 May 2022, connection on 15 May 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2783> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.2783>

This text was automatically generated on 15 May 2022.



Author retains copyright and grants the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Entanglement and Non-Ontology

How Putnam clarifies the Link between Aesthetic and Ethical Value

Susana Cadilha and Vítor Guerreiro

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This research work is supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., in the context of the celebration of the program contract foreseen in the numbers 4, 5 and 6 of article 23.º of D.L. no. 57/2016 of 29 August, as amended by Law no. 57/2017 of 19 July.

1. Introduction

- 1 The *Vittorio Emanuele II Monument*, which stands between the Piazza Venezia and the Capitoline Hill in Rome, right on the ancient heart of the city, is interesting for the disparate reactions it arouses in natives and (some) tourists. While many of the latter may feel attracted by the massive heap of white marble with its profusion of statues, reliefs and columns, and probably see it as majestic, imponent, magnificent, imposing, grand, etc., some natives are actually prone to describe it with derogatory terms such as “the typewriter” and “the wedding cake,” seeing it rather as pompous, ostentatious, out of place, grandiose, in sum, *distasteful* and, therefore, *ugly*. Another way of putting it is to say that the appropriately backgrounded observer cannot avoid seeing the whole thing as *kitsch* of a certain kind; the kind associated with grandiloquence of power and vulgar appropriation of the past in the language of affectation. Describing it as “the typewriter” or “the wedding cake” captures the impression of its enduring effect on the urban landscape and its distinctive kitschy element: these words invite comparison between experience of the monument and the imagined experience of a gigantic replica of a typewriter or wedding cake, so as to bring out the true aesthetic aspect of jarringness, incongruousness, in sum, *inappropriateness*. They are more than just

derogatory expressions voicing a negative attitude; they introduce a perspective, a way of seeing.¹

- 2 These are not simply judgements made on the basis of sense perception and a *sui generis* reaction to the experience of certain shapes, masses, volumes, textures, lines and colors. They are riddled through and through with diverse contextual elements which are social, historical and cultural: the monument itself is a political statement made through architecture (in fact, a series of related political statements: from celebration of unified Italy under the Savoy dynasty to “Altar of the Fatherland” and its use during Italian fascism). The unsuspecting tourist, through the perspective of an uninformed gaze, might just see continuity where the properly backgrounded subject sees disruption, the intrusion of a foreign body carving a perpetual scar on the flesh and surface of the cultural organism which is the city – a disruption that may perversely operate through the pretense of continuity, a mimicry of ancient grandeur that not only falls short of it but quickly betrays itself as mockery – unwilling parody being an important thread in the phenomenon of kitsch. But then again, the uninformed gaze might also see generosity instead of guile, or unconventional straightforwardness instead of political cunning, deviousness and deceit. To be able to see such things one requires training, no less than to recognize the shape of a chord progression in music or the intricate play of meanings in a well-crafted sentence. It takes time, a diverse combination of the virtues that Hume (1985) ascribed to the “ideal judge” (though always in a real life and therefore less than ideal state) and probably some more, all of which presupposes a further condition, which is personal growth, development, or, in one word, flourishing (which always comes in a variety of imperfect degrees, as is to be expected in real life experience). In other words, it is not the same as a machine built yesterday and running an algorithm in order to detect the presence of a “real” (mind-independent) property, or a barometer measuring air pressure.
- 3 It is now time to explain the point of this little slice of *Lebenswelt*, of actual experience in the lives of individuals, and, in fact, what it presents us with is a raw illustration of the complexities involved in apparently simple attributions of aesthetic value to things, as well as what is involved in real cases of aesthetic disagreement. It is a concrete example of how the question of value is pressing, unavoidable and ongoing for us, even if it is discarded by some philosophers, from the comfort of the armchair, as irredeemably obscure and mysterious. As Hilary Putnam phrased it, “the question of fact and value is a forced choice question. Any reflective person *has* to have a real opinion upon it” (Putnam 1981: 127).
- 4 And we could go further and say, as the example shows, that not only “reflective” persons are unavoidably confronted with the more speculative question of how fact and value are related. Also the common citizen of contemporary Rome and the more or less barbarian tourist one may find in its streets are unable to avoid value judgements and disagreement about them – even the option of being indifferent to marble monstrosities and the like generates further disputes that are ultimately about value and is only intelligible as an option from the standpoint of creatures who, like us, are bound to make value judgements. Even if there is a question of scepticism about the objectivity of value being a theoretically consistent view, it cannot be *pragmatically* consistent, short of a radical change in “the texture of the human world” (*ibid.*: 141) akin to Putnam’s thought experiment with the “Super-Benthamites.” And if there is a role to be played here by philosophy it is to provide us with a measure of

understanding of the phenomenon, even if not with knowledge of any new “facts of the matter.”

- 5 Other features of the example are the following: 1) it suggests that, in our actual experience, concepts of aesthetic value are more often than not *entangled* with concepts of ethical value; 2) it provides at the same time a vivid case of what Putnam calls the entanglement of factual descriptions and value judgements; 3) it suggests, against the grain of traditional theorisation in aesthetics, how Putnam’s idea of a “pragmatist enlightenment” in philosophy opens up a promising new approach to the understanding of value, from the standpoint of how it actually works in our lives; how aesthetics, as well as ethics, can be fruitfully seen as a “system of interrelated concerns, which are mutually supporting but also in partial tension” (Putnam 2004: 22), which is what cases of aesthetic disagreement like the one we describe above most notably exemplify.
- 6 Our aim here is a quite modest one. We want to look at Putnam’s project of an “ethics without ontology,” focusing on some crucial aspects of it, namely: a) the entanglement of fact and value; b) the idea that standards of correction in a certain domain are not exhausted by the *description* of either natural or non-natural facts (what he calls “objectivity without objects”); c) the idea of “[understanding and learning to] imaginatively identify” with a “particular evaluative outlook” (*ibid.*: 69) as the crucial mechanism by which we are able to apply *thick concepts*;² and, finally, d) the idea of a “pragmatist enlightenment,” by which one abandons the illusion of an “absolute conception of the world,” or the traditional project of grounding ethics on a metaphysics, be it an “inflationary” one (such as the Platonic variety, which posits “non-natural properties”), or a “deflationary” one, in its “reductionist” or “eliminationist” varieties (*ibid.*: 78). With our eyes set on these aspects, we attempt to draw important lessons for the project of a joint approach to aesthetic and ethical value, not as two isolated domains but taking seriously the pervading entanglement of both, as suggested in the example of “aesthetic disagreement” with which we started. This should provide us with an outline of a possible way of extending Putnam’s project so as to include the aesthetic domain; or perhaps we should call it the outline of a contextualist approach to aesthetics that draws on Putnam’s project for ethics. The plausibility of such a proposal will be shown by establishing connections between Putnam’s remarks and recent developments in both aesthetics and ethics. We conclude by suggesting that a fruitful way of pursuing the connection between aesthetic and ethical value could be found in co-opting resources from virtue ethics. Here we take advantage of Putnam’s appeal to the concept of *human flourishing* (Putnam 1981). The modesty of the aim lies in the fact that here we can only gesture towards a “research program,” and not conclusively demonstrate that we need aesthetic value to understand ethical value and vice versa. But even this is very much in tune with Putnam’s pragmatic approach.

2. Casting Light on the Problem

- 7 Value permeates the lives of people. We may lack a clear understanding of how this is so, but we do know that certain things matter to us more than others, that different things matter quite a lot to us in very different ways and for different reasons. The fact that each one of us is the unique *subject of a life* and not merely a belief-forming

machine with a perceptual system (the sort of picture that might be evoked by expressions such as “cognitive agent”) is inextricably bound with the concept of value. Plausibly, nothing matters more to us than our own lives and how they relate to the lives of others (following the Aristotelian idea that humans are fundamentally social and political animals). After all, why would any particular object or experience matter to us if not from the point of view of how those things acquire a place, status and “directionality” within the context of our lives as structured wholes (Levinson 2004), unfolding in a way we could describe as “narrative-like” (Goldie 2012)?³ Also plausibly, we cannot make sense of the idea of “living a life,” by contrast with simply “being alive,” if we do not think of ourselves as creatures for whom *valuing* is a crucial activity, the activity without which there simply are no *structured practices* that distinguish the living of a life from the mere state of being alive or a “mechanical” sequence of such states, to employ the Deweyan metaphor. A corollary of all this is that the connection between aesthetic and ethical value may seem mysterious and dubious from the standpoint of the armchair, but it is forced on us from the standpoint of *embodied experience*, such as, for instance, the experience of being confronted with a marble monstrosity that is not simply there to be an object of sight, but screams at us, telling us how we should go about in our valuations, by shaping our relationship with the environment, not just through conceptualization but through bodily interaction. So what we need from a philosophical approach is to make sense of this phenomenon, and this is what we believe Putnam’s pragmatic approach may assist us in doing.

3. Putnam’s Project

- 8 Putnam famously contended that there is no absolute conception of reality to be found behind the diversity of our language games. According to an absolute conception of reality, what is *real* would be identified with what is accessible from any point of view (Putnam 2004; McNaughton 1988; McDowell 1985). The problem with this idea, according to Putnam, is that we cannot make sense of such a point of view, a God’s eye point of view, for that would, among other things, incur the “illusion that there could be just one sort of language game which could be sufficient for the description of the whole of reality!” (Putnam 2004: 22). He further argued that both metaphysical realism and anti-realism presuppose such a point of view, and that this is the main reason why both ethical and aesthetic values have been regarded as suspicious, not *real* “entities”: they have no place within the absolute conception of reality, the true description of “what there is,” sought by those committed to “Ontology.”
- 9 The challenges posed by such putative entities as values were identified long ago. For instance, Hume stated that “Vice and virtue [...] may be compared to sounds, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind” (Hume 1972, Book 111, 51: 203). Evaluative properties are thus not real properties of objects, but rather a manifestation of the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects.” Two centuries later, Mackie argued along the same lines: moral values and moral facts are not the sort of thing that can be part of the “fabric” of the world. Suppose, for instance, that we describe a homicide. There will be certain aspects of that action that are factual, that belong to the constitution of the world: “X pierces Y with a knife,” “blood gushes out,” etc. And it may also be a fact about the world that someone, or the society as a whole, *considers* that action to be

wrong. However, there is in the world no fact that consists in the action itself being wrong; evaluative properties are not real, they are merely the “projection or objectification of moral attitudes” (Mackie 1977: 42). A related view in aesthetics is that of the “aesthetic attitude theorists,” in the line of Bullough (1912), and Stolnitz (1960), who provide psychological explanations of aesthetic experience, a line that goes back to Kant (2000) and ultimately to Hume’s “projectionism.”⁴

- 10 It is also to Hume that Putnam traces back what he calls the dichotomy between *facts* and *values*, which, through the influence of logical positivism has become an entrenched cultural institution in the 20th century, holding its sway up to our time well after the philosophical ideas underpinning it have been long demolished, according to Putnam, by moves in philosophy that he sees as having been propelled by the influence of American pragmatism, e.g. Quine’s (1951) criticisms of the analytical-synthetical distinction or the thesis of conceptual relativity. And it is precisely this absolute contrast between facts and values that Putnam diagnoses as the cause of the current deadlock between realist and anti-realist approaches to ethical (and aesthetic) value, and thus the persistence of the “ontological program,” in its inflationary and deflationary varieties. So the current deadlock is between positing mysterious non-natural properties (the Plato-Moore line) to buttress our evaluative discourse; to reduce value properties to some other thing (explain them away); or to eliminate them from our “ontology” altogether. In aesthetics, the deadlock is between varieties of aesthetic realism that posit equally mysterious (though not non-natural) aesthetic properties,⁵ resorting to the metaphysical notion of supervenience, via the work of Sibley (1959; 1965) in order to make them palatable (Zangwill 2001; Zemach 1997);⁶ and varieties of anti-realism, mostly of Kantian inspiration (Scruton 1996), with the eliminationist strand represented by authors like Dickie (1964) and Cohen (1973). To break this theoretical impasse generated by the “ontological program,” Putnam proposes his “pragmatic pluralism,” which, in his words, “does not require us to find mysterious and supersensible objects behind our language games” so that “the truth can be told in language games that we actually play when language is working” (Putnam 2004: 22).
- 11 These are, in broad outline, the terms of the discussion. A realist about value (in the pragmatic sense of “realist”), who holds that the evaluative properties of things are real and (at least some) value attributions objective, must answer this challenge. Putnam, however, will argue that the true problem lies in the terms of the discussion themselves, namely, with the concept of a “real property.” So a pragmatist leap out of the deadlock must contemplate a reform of the conceptual vocabulary with which we approach these issues.⁷
- 12 And what is a *real* property? Under some interpretations, a real property is one that can be characterized without reference to the experiences or responses of the observer – real properties would then be physical properties of objects, such as mass and position, which exist in the world itself, independently of us. In other words, real properties are “mind-independent” properties. These would be the primary qualities of objects, as they are described by our best scientific theories. In contrast, secondary properties are dependent on the sensibility of the observer, and while they can still be said to be a part of the causal structure of the world, in the sense that our perceptions are *caused* by “real properties,” value properties seem to be further removed from it.⁸ Normally, the

model for thinking about evaluative properties is that of secondary qualities, and thus they would not be real in a proper sense.⁹

- 13 Of course, this understanding of what a real property consists in, is subsidiary of the absolute conception of reality to which Putnam objects; and he objects to it for at least two different yet related reasons. First, he denies that the scientific viewpoint gives us a factual, neutral and objective description of the fabric of the world as it is in itself, independently of any particular perspective. Second, he also denies that those properties or qualities that cannot be characterized without reference to observers' responses and sensibilities should be considered any less real. Since we are in no position to tell which properties are accessible from any point of view, it is preposterous to contend that only those properties accessible from that point of view are real. And given that Putnam rejects the absolute conception of reality, then the idea that values are nothing more than "projections" of human attitudes or beliefs, to be contrasted with the world "as it is," ceases to make sense.
- 14 How does then Putnam understand evaluative properties, exactly? Let us first consider a simpler case: the example of colour. Secondary qualities, in general, are understood in terms of dispositions of an object to present a certain kind of perceptual appearance. An object's property of "being red" is to be understood in virtue of that object being such that, under the appropriate circumstances, it looks red to a suitable class of observers. In other words, it has a power to elicit experiences of red in normal observers, under standard conditions of observation. It is a quality of the object that is dependent on how humans (or other relevantly similar beings with colour vision), with a sufficient degree of visual acuity and under appropriate lighting conditions, visually experience the object. Is it then a subjective or an objective property? The property of "being red" is subjective in the sense that it is only conceivable in terms of certain subjective states it originates – something "being red" means that something "looks red" to someone. However, this is not to mean that this property does not genuinely belong to the object, in the sense that an object being such that it looks red to someone is not dependent on the particular experience of looking red to someone on a particular occasion, and also in the sense that the application of colour predicates is not an arbitrary practice with no standards of correction.
- 15 Evaluative properties – even if we apply to them something like the model of dispositional properties – are of course much more complex than colour properties. But the whole point is that they are to be understood as similar to *real* dispositional perceptual properties of objects, which will appear as such-and-such to ideal observers under ideal conditions, and not merely projections of the human mind. According to Putnam, evaluative properties cannot be characterized without reference to the responses of observers,¹⁰ but they are not unreal or arbitrary; in fact, they are precisely the kind of properties about which the judgments of rational inquirers can be expected to converge. For sure, convergence about value is widespread, but if lack of convergence was *overwhelmingly* more widespread than convergence, social life would hardly be possible at all. But even though the life of a society may reach dramatic or even desperate levels of conflict, unrest, and disintegration, it always falls short of a Hobbesian "state of nature." For obvious reasons, lack of convergence in matters of value is far more conspicuous to us than the unbroken chain of convergences that sustain everyday life, even throughout periods of terrible disruption. Obviously, it is hardly ever the case that everyone converges on some specific question of value; but

then again, that is hardly ever the case on any kind of question. Furthermore, if we follow Putnam's reasoning, we will find evaluative aspects in practically all sorts of factual questions. To give just one example in the case of art, what makes it possible that certain artworks appear to us as "unconventional," highly original or revolutionary is precisely the background of convergence (e.g. the fact that our experience of artworks is organized by "artistic categories" (Walton 1970), for instance in being grouped into *styles*) allowing variations and departures from the "pattern" to be visible at all. The general lesson here is that in matters of value, lower level discontinuities presuppose a background of higher level continuities, on the basis of which the discontinuities will either be resolved or transformed into something else. This may be somewhat confusing, but it is exactly what Putnam means when he suggests that we need "a complex vision of human nature" if we are to grasp the common ground between aesthetics and ethics (Putnam 2004: 8).

- 16 Obviously, the notion of "ideal observer," in the case of colour, differs from the notion of "ideal observer" when applied to the case of values; or better yet, what counts as an ideal observer differs from one case to the other. In the case of colour, what we have in mind is just statistical normality. In the case of values, we will not derive a standard of correction from a statistical norm; rather, the notion of merit will be involved (McDowell 1998). When a certain situation is perceived as cruel, this *merits* some response (e.g. disgust, moral reprobation, etc.), in the same way as when some situation is perceived as funny (e.g. when the telling of a joke is perceived as funny, laughter is not merely a causal effect but a *merited response* to that kind of situation, and this specific type of merited response is what constitutes the point of telling a joke and makes evaluation of jokes possible).
- 17 This is the point where the concepts of *context* and *evaluative outlook* enter the picture (Putnam 2004: 69). An evaluative outlook is what enables us to see an action as *cruel*, a situation as *funny* or a passage as *fustian*, or, indeed, a broodingnagian marble monument as jarring, ostentatious and kitsch. The discernment of value properties can be clarified by the idea of trained visual perception: to "perceive" moral and aesthetic properties one must become the right kind of person, with a repertoire of appropriately developed skills. The right kind of person is one with a trained sensibility – in developing perceptual and conceptual powers, tools and skills, the agent is *ipso facto* developing her ability to discern these properties. This also requires an understanding of both ethical and aesthetic ascriptions of value in contextualist terms: judgements are relative to groups of people (not isolated individuals) in concrete historical situations and, ultimately, to forms of (social) life. We shall return to this line of thought later on.
- 18 A promising line of argument for a contextualist approach of this kind must involve an analysis of the so-called *thick evaluative concepts*, just as Putnam does (Putnam 2002: 34). In contrast with *thin* evaluative concepts, such as *good/bad* and *right/wrong*, thick concepts involve both descriptive and evaluative elements. Examples of thick ethical concepts, as we mentioned before, are *cruel*, *brave*, *temperate*, and *just*; examples of thick aesthetic concepts are *garish*, *graceful*, *umpy*, and, of course, *kitsch*. A further interesting point to notice here, so as to bring the notion of ethical-aesthetic entanglement into the picture, is how thick *ethical* concepts are often used to make *aesthetic* valuations and, conversely, many thick aesthetic concepts are used to make attributions of moral value. McGinn (1997: 92-3) suggests a further category of thick

concepts, which he dubs “terms of moral appraisal with a strong *aesthetic* flavour,” to which we would also like to add the notion of an aesthetic term with a strong *moral* flavour, *kitsch* being perhaps the best example.¹¹ We cannot come to see something as kitsch if we are not also able to see it as the *aesthetic manifestation of certain traits of character* in people who produce and consume or use it.¹²

- 19 All of this suggests just how aesthetic and ethical values are no less entangled than description and valuation are.
- 20 To characterize an action as cruel is both to describe and to appraise it. Thick concepts illustrate the idea that there are no discursive situations or practices (e.g. scientific discourse) in which we are simply describing reality as it is, reporting pure or brute facts, on the one hand, and discursive situations and practices in which we are simply evaluating reality (e.g. everyday moral discourse and art criticism), by projecting our attitudes onto it, on the other hand. As Putnam argues, both our factual descriptions of reality and our evaluative assessments of it are a constant entanglement of facts and values, such that it is not possible to pull the evaluative and descriptive components apart. He plausibly contends that it is not possible to disentangle the descriptive component of concepts such as *cruel* from its evaluative component (as, for instance, Blackburn (1981; 2006) intends) precisely because knowing how to apply concepts such as *cruel* is only possible once a certain evaluative outlook is formed and made available – and an evaluative outlook has a conceptual, an affective and also an imaginative dimension, all of which are deeply interconnected. As Putnam sees it (Putnam 2002: 38), the descriptive and evaluative components of thick concepts are impossible to disentangle because the descriptive content of the concept is in part determined by the evaluative content – only someone who can understand the evaluative point of defining an action as cruel or a monument as absurdly kitsch is able to apply those concepts in new cases. In other words, one learns how to play that particular language game.
- 21 Stressing the role of thick evaluative concepts and the importance of the formation of an evaluative outlook is also to stress the contextualist dimension of value ascriptions without abandoning the idea of realism and objectivity about values. Value properties such as cruelty and kitschiness are real properties, and judgements of value are susceptible of being true or false: we can misjudge or make mistakes about ascriptions of value, and we can get things right. However, values cannot be characterized without reference to the responses, skills and the historically informed, socially embedded experience of observers. Putnam’s lesson is that we need not to give up the idea of realism and objectivity about values, but we do need to cast aside the idea of an absolute conception of reality. In particular, we need to relinquish that conception not for the sake of reclaiming the reality of values, but basically because we are unable to make sense of it. The attempt to ground evaluative discourses and practices outside the normative terrain is a modern *idée fixe* that became attached to a notion of scientific objectivity brought about by the development of modern science; but the very idea that it is possible to take such a step back and define what the world is in *itself*, the perpetual temptation of thought to go outside of itself, is the source of many philosophical (pseudo?)problems, and no doubt of many philosophical misunderstandings.
- 22 Still in line with his internal realism, which basically denies “that there are any [experiential] inputs which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts, by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them, or any inputs which admit of

only one description, independent of all conceptual choices” (Putnam 1981: 54), Putnam’s project of an ethics without ontology shows us a way of resisting that temptation, while not giving up on the notions of correctness and objectivity. Putnam had no intention to blur the difference between true and false judgements, objective and subjective knowledge, right and wrong inferences. But he held that what actually makes the difference is not what we usually think it does: more specifically, what makes the difference are not metaphysically objective facts independent of our discursive practices.

- 23 One objection with which a contextualist approach of this kind is inevitably faced is that of the threat of cultural relativism and particularism. As we have seen, judgments of value so conceived are relative to groups of people (not to isolated individuals) and, ultimately, to socially shared forms of life. If judgements of value are culturally local, and the intelligibility of value concepts relies on particular practices of particular cultures, then how can we aim at a universal or cross-cultural evaluative language, since we cannot just assume here a possibility of convergence (Williams 1985)? Putnam (2002) countered this move by arguing that a realism of thick concepts does not inevitably lead us into relativism. First, there is no reason to assume that thick evaluative concepts cannot be universally or cross-culturally shared (think, for instance, of the concepts we use to articulate our experiences of beauty). Second, critical reflection on our own practices is always possible, even if from an internal standpoint. Nor is there a reason to believe that this critical, reflective step back would only be possible if our evaluative practices and discourses were underpinned by metaphysically objective facts. In Putnam’s words, “There are many sorts of statements – bona fide statements, ones amenable to such terms as ‘correct,’ ‘incorrect,’ ‘true,’ ‘false,’ ‘warranted,’ and ‘unwarranted’ – that are not descriptions, but that are under rational control, governed by standards appropriate to their particular functions and contexts” (Putnam 2002: 33).
- 24 Standards of correction are internal to practical reasoning, which is true of any kind of conceptual or cognitive activity, not just ethical reasoning or art criticism. We draw here another lesson from Putnam’s pragmatic approach. The objection of circularity that some have voiced is, according to Putnam, simply misguided, for, he argued, it is not possible “to provide *reasons which are not part of ethics for the truth of ethical statements*” (Putnam 2004: 3). And this should not be a problem since it is exactly similar to what happens in science, which is our paradigm of objective discourse. “Normative judgements are essential to the practice of science itself. [...] [J]udgements of ‘coherence,’ ‘plausibility,’ ‘reasonableness,’ ‘simplicity’ and of what Dirac famously called the beauty of an hypothesis, are all normative judgements in Charles Peirce’s sense, judgements of ‘what ought to be’ in the case of reasoning.” (Putnam 2002: 30-1). These normative values of coherence, simplicity, etc., are what Putnam calls epistemic values, which can also be cast as *aesthetic* values for theories (Zemach 1997). When a scientific theory is evaluated as simple and coherent (which also counts as a reason for believing it to be true), “[...] it is not that we have some way of telling that we have arrived at the truth *apart from* our epistemic values and can, so to speak, run a test to see how often choosing the more coherent, simpler, and so on, theory turns out to be true *without presupposing these very standards of justified empirical belief*. [...] [I]f these epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world [...] that is something we

see through the lenses of those very values. It does not mean that those values admit an 'external' justification." (Putnam 2002: 32-3).

4. Bridging the Aesthetic and the Ethical

- 25 It is now time that we focus on the entanglement of aesthetic and ethical value. We described a series of important features in Putnam's project of an "ethics without ontology," a project which flows from his well-known thesis about the profound entanglement of factual descriptions and value judgements, so that any description will inevitably contain evaluative elements, countering the deep-seated dichotomy between an objective realm of facts and a subjective realm of values:

Knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of values. This is the position I defend. It might be broken into two separate claims: (i) that the activity of justifying actual claims presupposes value judgments, and (ii) that we must regard those value judgments as capable of being right (as "objective" in philosophical jargon), if we are not to fall into subjectivism with respect to the factual claims themselves. (Putnam 2002: 137)

- 26 If Putnam is right, then objectivity in human discourse is not possible without a repertoire of value concepts. An objective conception of the world is not a neutral description of the facts from a God's eye point of view, for no such point of view is available nor can it be made sense of. Subjects of knowledge are also subjects who at the most basic level of their existence must perform acts of valuation. This is why we started by connecting the exercise and honing of our perceptual and conceptual skills and abilities in an actual case of aesthetic valuation with the idea of being a *subject of a life*, given our account of valuation as the feature distinguishing between the living of a life and the mere state of being alive. Knowing the world, acting on it and organizing it so that we may *recognize ourselves in it* are all actions carried out not by disembodied "cognitive agents" who happen to have this purely external relationship with a body and embodied experience, like belief-forming machines with a "perceptual interface"; these are all aspects (epistemic, ethical and aesthetic) of *one single thing* which is the living of a life, by a true subject of a life. This already establishes a framework for the disagreement between someone appalled before the sight of a marble monument and someone relishing the very same sight as a magnificent one. For it is only from the standpoint of a concrete "form of life," a life "being a certain way" (Levinson 2004), that the same monument can seem so vividly to exhibit such contrasting qualities. Mere perception, "aesthetic attitude" or any combination of psychological features in a single experience will not suffice. The whole "evaluative outlook" an individual develops in the course of her life, and which she gradually learns to "imaginatively identify" with, widening the boundaries of her experience, must be involved. And here lies a very important element: it is not implausible to assert that our dismayed native Roman will be able to put himself in the shoes of the beguiled tourist, for this will be part of the imaginative skills he must hone in order to be capable of making the aesthetic assessment he makes (as if he switches between seeing a duck-rabbit picture as a duck or as a rabbit); but it seems to be part of what enables the tourist to have *his* aesthetic assessment that he *can't* put himself in the shoes of our native, just as someone relishing in the "all too sickly smooth and bland" music of Bryan Adams cannot get into Zangwill's shoes and perceive in it a quality "like very sweet artificial-tasting fizzy drinks" (Zangwill 2015: 7). If he could, he would not be able to switch back

from the rabbit to the duck. Obviously, we cannot provide a fully satisfactory demonstration of this point here; so for now we shall be content with plausibility.

- 27 We conclude this section with a lengthy quote from an author who, in his reflections about the continuity of aesthetic and ethical sentiment, strikes one as rather “Putnamian,” here and there, especially when he characterizes moral attitudes as “part of a continuum of normative opinions which mutually sustain one another” (Scruton 1996: 247).

Now there certainly seems to be an internal relation between aesthetic and moral judgement. In moral judgement it is usual to praise a man for certain qualities, and these qualities may be such that the question “Why is that a reason for admiring him?” normally requires no answer. Similarly, the analogous question asked of the aesthetic features of a work of art may also require no answer. And it is interesting to discover that the features of men and the features of works of art which are in this sense intrinsically admirable tend to coincide. We admire works of art, as we admire men, for their intelligence, wisdom, sincerity, depth of feeling, compassion and realism. It would be odd to acknowledge this, and yet to deny that there is a relation between moral and aesthetic judgement. [...] Even in the realm of abstract art, there is no way in which moral and aesthetic judgement can be neatly separated. If music were as abstract and unfathomable as is sometimes thought, then it would be impossible for there to be irony in music, or the deliberate exploitation of character. (*Ibid.*: 245-8)

- 28 Philosophers who object to the idea of grounding aesthetic normativity in ethical normativity often appeal to the phenomenon of “aesthetically discriminating moral brutes and aesthetically blind moral saints” (Zangwill 2015: 165), which suggests a radical discontinuity between the aesthetic and the ethical. Perhaps this picture is itself a consequence of thinking about ethics in terms of rules and principles, so that a connection between aesthetics and ethics would be demonstrated only if someone who acquired a set of moral rules would thereby be enabled to make appropriate aesthetic judgements. But maybe there is an alternative picture that can make better sense of the continuity between both domains.

5. A Virtue Theory Framework

- 29 One obvious place to draw inspiration for a contextualist approach to aesthetic-ethical value is Aristotelian virtue ethics. Within such a framework, ethical and aesthetic valuations may be contextually specific, but they are brought about by certain features of our reality, the elements of common human lived, embodied experience. That is why we can learn how to apply aesthetic terms from other cultures, importing new conceptual tools into the language game, so to speak: we grasp the “metaphors we live by” through the commonalities of embodied experience. We learn how to combine and recombine them in new, unexpected cases. This sort of approach connects the realist idea that there are value properties to be discerned with a measure of resistance to universal principles: the language of virtue cannot be translated into a set of universal rules and principles.
- 30 Putnam does not particularly stress the connection between his own pragmatist approach and virtue ethics (as, for instance, B. Williams and A. MacIntyre do apropos their own views), but he did most clearly state that “in ethics we need both Aristotelian and Kantian insights,” and the core of Aristotelian virtue theory, i.e. the concern with

human flourishing, is precisely what gives shape to “our imperfect but indefinitely perfectible ability to recognize the demands made upon us by various values” (Putnam 2002: 134). He can also be seen as almost suggesting that the concept of virtue is the perfect counterpoint to “a form of *monism*” that “reduces [...] all ethical phenomena, all ethical problems, all ethical questions, indeed all value problems, to just *one* issue, the presence or absence of this single super-thing *Good*” (Putnam 2004: 18-9). It was Aristotle who first objected to this form of monism by making explicit that ethics involves too many diverse questions and concerns to be captured by any rarefied abstract idea: “Not surprisingly, ethicists, starting with Aristotle, responded by pointing out that there are many questions concerning ethics, not only questions about good but questions about virtue, which cannot be usefully answered by talking about ‘the Form of the Good’” (*ibid.*: 19).

- 31 Also according to Putnam, the objectivity of value judgments is dependent on certain parochial capacities, and on an appropriately formed sensibility – here the idea of “understanding and imaginatively identification with an evaluative outlook” proves to be the decisive link – and is not reducible to universalizable norms or standards of correction. As he puts it, “the function of ethics is not, in the first instance, to arrive at ‘universal principles’” and “few real problems can be solved by treating them as mere instances of a universal generalization” (*ibid.*: 4). Applying evaluative standards correctly will thus depend on the circumstance of “seeing” correctly – it will be a matter of fine-tuning our perceptual and conceptual abilities, which are naturally influenced by our intellectual and practical formation/training (here McDowell employs the much more apt German word *Bildung*). Thus, the difference between someone with a trained sensibility and one who lacks such a trained sensibility does not rest at the level of the correct application of principles (of universalizability and consistency) or of a rational decision-making procedure, as is the case with deontologist and consequentialist ethical theories, respectively. A substantial part of the story to be told will depend on the idea of “perception,” as it is specifically applied to the ethical domain by Aristotelian theorists such as McDowell (1998), which is akin to the ability of *seeing*, and not merely *inferring* from non-evaluative cues, when an awkward piece of architectural display is or is not absurdly kitsch. In his turn, Putnam states quite clearly what he means by “moral perception”:

By “moral perception,” [...] I mean the ability to see that someone is, for example, “suffering unnecessarily” as opposed to “learning to take it,” that someone is “being refreshingly spontaneous” as opposed to “being impertinent,” that someone is “compassionate” as opposed to being “a weepy liberal,” and so on and on. There is no science that can teach one to make these distinctions. They require a skill that, in Iris Murdoch’s words, is “endlessly perfectible,” and that as she also says, is interwoven with our (also endlessly perfectible) mastery of moral vocabulary itself. (Putnam 2002: 128)

- 32 We believe that Putnam’s appeal to the concept of *human flourishing* provides us with a reasonable basis to vindicate a connection between aesthetic and ethical value, and we contend that when one thinks of morality in terms of virtues, the connections between aesthetics and ethics come out much more vividly than with other forms of ethical theory, and thus an approach to the intersection of both domains within the framework of a virtue theory not only seems like a promising avenue to expand Putnam’s project in order to include the aesthetic domain, but it also has precedents in similar developments attempted in epistemology (Zagzebski 1996) and the aesthetics of morality (Paris 2018; forthcoming). Trained visual perception of objects provides the

appropriate model for the discernment of value properties, in both cases. Ultimately, a virtue theoretical framework covering epistemic, ethical and aesthetic values would perhaps mean not only the fulfilment of Putnam's project, but also a clear sign that the cultural institution of the fact/value dichotomy – another white marble monstrosity – is indeed collapsing, however slowly, before our eyes.

6. Conclusion

- 33 We attempted to sketch the outlines of a refreshing approach to the connections between aesthetic and ethical value by making use of Putnam's project of an "ethics without ontology," suggesting ways in which this project can help us to cast a new light on the way we think about aesthetics. Particularly, we argued that Putnam's idea of how we are enabled to discriminate certain aspects of reality only by "imaginatively identifying with an evaluative outlook" is the true locus of the continuity between aesthetics and ethics, allowing us to see more clearly through the complexity of real life experiences of the entanglement of aesthetic and ethical value. To this we added the suggestion that a virtue theory framework is plausibly a fruitful way of complementing such a contextualist and pragmatist approach.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BELL Clive, (1914), *Art*, London, Frederick A. Stokes Co.
- BERGER John, (1972), *Ways of Seeing*, New York, Penguin.
- BLACKBURN Simon, (1981), "Rule-Following and Moral Realism," in Steven Holtzman & Christopher Leich (eds), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 163-87.
- BLACKBURN Simon, (2006), "Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism," in Andrew Fisher & Simon Kirchin (eds), *Arguing about Metaethics*, London, New York, Routledge, 470-88.
- BULLOUGH Edward, (1912), "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, 5, 87-98.
- COHEN Ted, (1973), "Aesthetic/Non-Aesthetic and the Concept of Taste: A Critique of Sibley's Position," *Theoria*, 39 (1-3), 113-52.
- DICKIE George, (1964), "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1), 56-65.
- GAUT Berys, (2010), *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- GOLDIE Peter, (2012), *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- HUME David, (1972 [1739]), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, London, Fontana.

- HUME David, (1985 [1757]), "Of the Standard of Taste," in Eugene F. Miller (ed.), *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 234-41.
- KANT Immanuel, (2000 [1790]), *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant), in Paul Guyer (ed.), Eric Matthews (trans.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- LEVINSON Jerrold, (2004), "Intrinsic Value and the Notion of a Life," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62 (4), 319-29.
- MACKIE John Leslie, (1977), *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- MCDOWELL John, (1985), "Values and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity*, London, Routledge.
- MCDOWELL John, (1998), *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- MCGINN Colin, (1997), *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- MCNAUGHTON David, (1988), *Moral Vision*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- PARIS Panos, (2018), "On Form, and the Possibility of Moral Beauty," *Metaphilosophy*, 49 (5), 711-29.
- PARIS Panos, (forthcoming), "The Aesthetics of Ethics: Exemplarism, Beauty, and the Psychology of Morality," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 1-25.
- PUTNAM Hilary, (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- PUTNAM Hilary, (2002), *The Collapse of the Fact-Value Distinction and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- PUTNAM Hilary, (2004), *Ethics Without Ontology*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- QUINE Willard Van Orman, (1951), "Main Trends in Recent Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *The Philosophical Review*, 60 (1), 20-43.
- SCRUTON Roger, (1996), *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*, South Bend, Ind., St. Augustine's Press.
- SHUSTERMAN Richard, (2008), *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SHUSTERMAN Richard, (2012), *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SIBLEY Frank, (1959), "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review*, 68 (4), 421-50.
- SIBLEY Frank, (1965), "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic," *Philosophical Review*, 74 (2), 135-59.
- STOLNITZ Jerome, (1960), *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism*, Cambridge, Riverside Press.
- WALTON Kendall, (1970), "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review*, 79 (3), 334-67.
- WILLIAMS Bernard, (1985), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London, Collins.
- ZAGZEBSKI Linda Trinkaus, (1996), *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- ZANGWILL Nick, (2001), *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- ZANGWILL Nick, (2015), *Music and Aesthetic Reality: Formalism and the Limits of Description*, New York, Routledge.

ZEMACH Eddy, (1997), *Real Beauty*, University Park, Penn State University Press.

NOTES

1. The idea is that “ways of seeing” reveal aspects of what is seen, which we would otherwise miss. For a fine illustration of this in the case of painting and photography, see Berys Gaut (2010: 30-1). John Berger (1972) is an obvious earlier source of such examples.
2. Concepts that combine descriptive and evaluative elements. Putnam’s favorite examples are moral concepts such as “cruel,” “brave,” “temperate” and “just,” but we shall return to this further ahead.
3. We believe this sheds a new light on statements such as “it is better to have a life that begins poorly and ends well than a life that begins well and ends poorly,” which is as close as one can get to an aesthetic-moral judgement, since it attributes aesthetic value to the “moral shape” of a life, in much the same way one could appraise the formal properties of a story, a painting or a musical work. On this topic, see Paris 2018.
4. Putnam doesn’t discuss these issues in connection with aesthetics, so what we do here is to fill in at least some of the gaps, in order to establish the relevant parallels and connections.
5. That they indeed *are* somehow mysterious is even explicitly recognized by the aesthetic realist (e.g. Zangwill) who endorses the “aesthetic metaphor thesis”: the idea that there are properties we cannot describe literally, only metaphorically. So, in this view, we employ the same word “sad” to people and music, but we express different concepts in each case. Musical sadness, for instance, is not literal sadness. What musical sadness *is* so that it is a real property, is shrouded in mystery. The anti-realist (e.g. Scruton) may say that we merely *imagine* music to be sad, without attributing any properties, and he will dissolve the mystery, but, so the aesthetic realist argues, only by sacrificing aesthetic normativity.
6. A non-naturalist “intuitionist” realism of the Moorean line, as we find it in Bell (with whom “significant form” takes the place of Moore’s “good”) having become unfashionable (Bell 1914).
7. We should set a caveat here. The idea of developing a pragmatist aesthetics is obviously not something new. For one, Richard Shusterman’s project of a “somaesthetics,” developed in a series of books (2008; 2012), comes obviously to mind. But here we are concerned specifically with how Putnam’s insights may help us in a joint approach to aesthetics and ethics.
8. “A secondary quality is a property the ascription of which to an object is not adequately understood except as true, if it is true, in virtue of the object’s disposition to present a certain sort of perceptual appearance.” (McDowell 1998: 133).
9. However, Zemach (1997: 95-114), who is a realist about aesthetic properties, conceives of them as “tertiary properties,” which he defines as “phenomenal properties” further modulated by “desire,” and so this also counts as an approach modelled on secondary properties, with a peculiar twist. But it is not completely clear how Zemach is able to distinguish his approach from an anti-realist one, however plausible his explanation of aesthetic properties seems *from the point of view of our experience*.
10. “If something is a good solution to a problematical human situation, then part of the very notion of its being a good solution is that human beings can recognize that it is. We need not entertain the idea that something could be a good solution although human beings are in principle unable to recognize that it is.” (Putnam 2002: 108).
11. Another possible example would be the Japanese aesthetic term *wabi-sabi*. See: plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/.
12. Just like, ironically, for Zangwill (2015: 7) part of what makes the music of Bryan Adams so “cringe-making” is the fact that he “clearly intends his music to have aesthetic value” (an anti-

formalist aesthetic judgement if there ever was one), so similar traits of people who relish in kitsch are part of what gives the notion of kitsch its substance.

ABSTRACTS

In this article we consider Putnam's project of an "ethics without ontology," focusing on some of its crucial aspects, namely, the entanglement of fact and value and the idea of forming and "imaginatively identifying" with a "particular evaluative outlook." We use that approach to shed light on the issue of value objectivity. Putnam's "pragmatist enlightenment" suggests a way of abandoning the traditional project of grounding ethics and aesthetics on metaphysics, preserving the idea of realism and objectivity about values. Ethical and aesthetic discriminations may be contextually specific and depend on the responses and the socially embedded experience of observers, but they are brought about by certain features of reality, far more complex than a domain of "objects" that would "correspond" to values. With our eyes set on these aspects, we draw important lessons for the project of a joint approach to aesthetic and ethical value, taking seriously the pervading entanglement of both, as suggested by the way we are able to apply the so-called thick concepts. This provides us with the outline of a contextualist approach to aesthetics that draws on Putnam's project for ethics. We conclude by suggesting that a fruitful way of pursuing this connection could be found in co-opting resources from virtue ethics.

AUTHORS

SUSANA CADILHA

IFILNOVA - NOVA FCSH - NOVA University of Lisbon
susanacadilha[at]fcsb.unl.pt

VÍTOR GUERREIRO

Researcher of the Institute of Philosophy, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. Via
Panorâmica Edgar Cardoso s / n 4150-564 Porto, Portugal
vguerreiro[at]letras.up.pt