

AESTHETIC SUPERVENIENCE

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It. *Sopravvenienza estetica*; Fr. *Survenance esthétique*; Germ. *Ästhetische Supervenienz*; Span. *Superveniencia estética*. The term “supervenience” derives etymologically from the Latin *supervenio* (“to come to or in addition to, to overtake”). Supervenience is a central notion in the analytic philosophical debate. It is used to characterize a relation between two sets of properties: specifically, a set of properties A supervenes upon another set B just in case no two things can differ with respect to A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. In aesthetics, supervenience is standardly taken as a relation between aesthetic properties and nonaesthetic properties.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In historical reconstruction, it is often claimed that the term was first used by R.M. Hare to characterize a relationship between moral properties and natural properties (Hare 1952), even if it is now widely recognized that back in 1922 G.E. Moore already expressed a supervenience thesis without using the term (“two things cannot differ in quality without differing in intrinsic nature”, Moore 1922) and that British emergentists contributed in the 30s to upgrade the notion by connecting emergent properties with their base properties (Morgan 1923; Broad 1925).

Anyway, it was only in the 70s, with the growth of the mind/body debate in the philosophy of mind, that the notion took centre stage. Donald Davidson, in a seminal paper, offered the following definition: “mental characteristics are in some sense dependent, or supervenient, on physical characteristics. Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respects, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respects without altering in some physical respects. Dependence or supervenience of this kind does not entail reducibility through law or definition” (Davidson 1970).

In Davidson’s formulation we have the three fundamental elements of any supervenience thesis: necessary covariation, non-reductionism and dependency. The last aspect, dependency, was clearly the most promising one: philosophers hoped that supervenience was able to show how high-level or emergent

properties (e.g. mental properties) depend on low-level or base properties (e.g. physical properties). It's no wonder then that it quickly gained popularity in almost every philosophical field.

ART AND AESTHETICS

In analytic aesthetics, the problematic relationship between aesthetic properties, qualities, predicates, judgements, attributes etc. and their physical basis is closely associated with the name of Frank Sibley. In one of his most widely known papers, Sibley stated that a) it is possible (and desirable) to distinguish between aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties, b) aesthetic properties existence depends on nonaesthetic properties existence and c) nonaesthetic properties establish aesthetic ones: any change in aesthetic properties is caused by a change in nonaesthetic properties (Sibley 1965).

This characterization seems to fit in the supervenience model very well, and in fact Jerrold Levinson in his *Aesthetic Supervenience* provided the following definition: "Two objects (e.g., artworks) that differ *aesthetically* necessarily differ *nonaesthetically* (i.e. there could not be two objects that were aesthetically *different* yet nonaesthetically *identical*: fixing the nonaesthetic properties of an object fixes its aesthetic properties)" (Levinson 1984).

But what is the explicative power of aesthetic supervenience? It maybe establishes a generic dependency of aesthetic properties on nonaesthetic properties, but does it also explain, in aesthetic discussions, how a certain nonaesthetic property causes the emergence of a particular aesthetic property?

From the beginning, there has been skepticism about that. When we consider a work of art, a nonaesthetic properties set, in addition to "physical" properties (like form, lines, colours, sounds), must contain contextual properties, like historical ones (Walton 1970). It results that contextual properties narrow the field down to very few candidates for application of a specific supervenient property, since "if the B-properties are to include the kinds of historical properties [...], it seems that two works with the same B-properties will be the *same* work. Works with the same B-properties will be works that originated in the same community from the hand of the same author/artist/composer, bearing the same relations of precedence and influence to other works. It is difficult to make sense of the idea that works that share all these properties could be *different works*" (Currie 1990).

To sum up, in aesthetics we can just consider a very weak supervenience thesis, a kind of relationship in danger of announcing "the true but vacuous claim that a thing situated in a particular context, to the extent that it is that thing so situated, has the character that it does" (MacKinnon 2001).

Furthermore, aesthetic supervenience says nothing about what nonaesthetic properties are relevant for aesthetic properties attribution, since an object (i.e. a work of art) has an aesthetic property in virtue of some of its nonaesthetic properties but not others.

It seems that in recent years aesthetic supervenience has lost its appeal. As far as we can see, aestheticians have come to believe that supervenience "is not a metaphysically 'deep' relation; it is only a

“phenomenological” relation about patterns of property covariation, patterns that possibly are manifestations of some deeper dependence relationships” (Kim 1998).

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