How to think about how to think about aesthetic value

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ABSTRACT

Several art scholars have recently doubted the prudence of thinking about the nature of aesthetic value. The problem is that traditional thinking about aesthetic value fails to capture the specificities with which empirical art scholars must grapple. This paper diagnoses how the tradition came to think in this problematic way about aesthetic value. It then sketches an approach to aesthetic value that boosts the refractive power of the tools that scholars of the arts can use to bring into focus some of the specificities they care about. The path to that goal skirts the troublesome features of traditional approaches.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic value; beauty; social practices; action

Skepticism arguably gains traction at precisely the point where the intellectual stakes outweigh what is at stake practically 1969. After all, skeptics about the existence of an external world are not embarrassed by their metaphysics as they pay good money for real estate. Aesthetic value skepticism is only apparently an exception to the rule. Perhaps aesthetic value is at best epiphenomenal, so that a grasp of the technical, historical, and social factors in the production and reception of works of art leaves no significant residue that must be understood as aesthetic (Prettejohn 2005). Yet aesthetic value skeptics are not embarrassed by their metaphysics when they get down to business. To take an example close to home, anyone who has served on a campus-wide tenure committee will know the weight given to aesthetic considerations in mathematics, where a proof counts for its elegance and a candidate is promoted for their good taste in problems to solve. Likewise, doubts at home in the seminar room simply have no place when hiring and tenuring practitioners in the schools of music and architecture or the departments of creative writing and film production. This essay is not, of course, a guide for academic policy makers. Its goal is to propose an approach to aesthetic value that is designed to boost the refractive power of the tools that scholars of the arts use to bring into focus some of the specificities they care about. However, it reaches this goal by floating a proposal about how to think about aesthetic value, within studies of the arts, as part of what is at stake practically.

The one, the many, and the meta

Commitment to aesthetic value skepticism runs so deeply and so pervasively that the first step towards towards a positive proposal must do more than haggle over some premise of skeptical reasoning. Moreover, what needs diagnosis is not only skepticism about aesthetic value in empirical arts studies, because analytic philosophy gave up on aesthetic value in step with the other humanities. For some time, philosophers had wanted a theory of aesthetic value in service of a theory of art—an understanding of aesthetic value that would shed light on the nature and special significance of that enormously broad and varied range of human production (Bourdieu 1987; Schaeffer 2000; Shiner 2001; Lopes 2014; Wolterstorff 2015). The collapse of aesthetic theories of art subsequently doomed theories of aesthetic value. Despite the debacle at the level of theory, arts scholars were free to go on attributing aesthetic values to works. That they did not reflects, broadly speaking, ethical and political considerations as much as metaphysical ones. However, the metaphysical roots of aesthetic value skepticism are revealing, because they are also methodological. They misconceive the nature and role of philosophical and empirical arts studies as each relates to the other.

Philosophy and empirical art studies belong among those partnerships that, in Richard Wollheim’s words, so blend into one another that “it is a matter more of tact than of observance to recognize where one begins and the other ends” (Wollheim 1999). Conceiving them along departmental lines obscures how all kinds of scholars join in
reflecting on theoretical matters and contributing to theory construction. In particular, as we shall see, all kinds of scholars, including philosophers, looked to theory to provide an Archimedean point prior to and independent of empirical studies.

Start with the philosophers. How could they even think to venture into aesthetics without relying on empirical arts studies? Consider the philosophy of time. Many philosophers crafted accounts of time as a phenomenon with which they were directly familiar. Some grounded their views phenomenologically, introspecting their experiences of time; some sought to articulate what is implicit in “ordinary language” talk about time; some tested their views against intuitive counterexamples; and some strove to fit observations about time into a philosophical system. Nowadays, however, many philosophers craft accounts of time viewed as precisely the phenomenon that figures in the best hypotheses and explanations of physics. The contrast is between first-order philosophy, where theory comes from philosophers examining a phenomenon directly, and second-order philosophy, where philosophers examine the phenomenon indirectly, by examining how it figures in the work of others, who do first-order research. Second-order philosophy stands in a meta-relation to some other body of research; first-order philosophy stands on its own.

Until recently, philosophical aesthetics was routinely first order, even as practiced in vastly different ways. Aesthetics came to Kant as a corollary of the project of the critiques, which turned out to require an account of pleasure in relation to empirical judgment, which delivered an account of aesthetic pleasure. (Philosophers take sly pride in Kant’s having accomplished so much while knowing next to nothing about art—the foils are Hume and Hegel, both able critics.) Recent analytic aesthetics has favored the method of testing theoretical hypotheses against intuitive counterexamples. Since judgements made in the context of an artistic practice are theory-laden, philosophers who are competent participants in a practice can detect in their own judgements the echoes of the theory that is implicit in the practice. When Noël Carroll writes that “a comprehensive theory of art must accommodate the facts as [the philosopher] finds them revealed in our practices,” he sees philosophers as mulling over the practices as participant-observers (Carroll 1999). Notice how these two otherwise rather different first-order approaches make it entirely optional for philosophers to consult empirical arts studies. They have all too often exercised the option.

In line with a trend across analytic philosophy, second-order philosophical aesthetics is becoming more common, and has been formally defended as a worthy enterprise (Lopes 2018a). Aesthetics done by second-order philosophers indirectly attends to artistic and aesthetic phenomena by directly attending to how those phenomena figure in hypotheses and explanations of empirical scholarship. Often the go-to first-order disciplines are the brain and behavioral sciences, especially psychology and neuroscience, but anthropology, sociology, and historical arts studies also headline. Jenefer Robinson understands the nature and significance of art emotion as a psychological phenomenon, Stephen Davies views art and aesthetic response as they figure in evolutionary explanations, and Lydia Goehr considers the concept of the musical work as it plays out in the history of nineteenth century European art music (Robinson 2005; Davies 2014; Goehr 2007). Here second-order philosophy stands in relation to empirical arts studies: it takes its cue from scholarship outside philosophy.

Second-order philosophy is by no means a repeater device that parrots back the conception of a phenomenon to which first-order scholars give voice. The idea is not to look up the declarations of first-order scholars about, say, the nature of musical works and then call it a day. Instead, the philosopher examines musicological hypotheses and explanations that refer to musical works and then posits musical works as items having the very features they need to have for the hypotheses and explanations to succeed. Proceeding in this way can, in principle, deliver an account of musical works that surprises first-order scholars or contradicts their declared outlook. Perhaps, for example, musicologists regard musical works as abstract instructions for performance, but musicological explanations need works to be changing historical individuals, like biological species. Meta-level thinking need not and indeed should not take ground-level thinking at face value; it is done well when done critically.

Although it is tempting, when reading the last few paragraphs, to slip back into hearing “philosophy” and “empirical arts studies” as departmental or guild designations, the terms ultimately refer to types of tasks. Attempting to delineate what counts as theory building would be a distraction, for the idea is not to address anxieties about who, in the academy, doing theory, does philosophy. Theory is everywhere, and so is philosophy.

What matters is not a contrast between philosophy and something else. What matters is the contrast between first- and second-order philosophy. Some of those who are titled philosophers now do second-order aesthetics, by crafting theories of artistic or aesthetic phenomena as those phenomena figure in empirical arts studies. They break from their more traditional colleagues who do first-order philosophy, which treats empirical art studies as at best informative background rather than essential mediator. By
contrast, outside its departmental home, almost all philosophy is second-order. That is, arts scholars are apt to do philosophy by taking a meta-level perspective on their ground-level work. Imagine what it would take for a dance historian or music theorist to do first-order philosophy. They would somehow have to find a way to bracket what they would get from close reading, interpretation, historical explanation, and the other empirical methods that are part of their training.

Putting the point another way, the distinction between first- and second-order philosophy entails no commitments with respect to the nature of theory. It does not burden those schooled in empirical methods to defend part of what they do as philosophy. What the distinction does entail is a commitment with respect to empirical methods: it denies that first-order philosophers practice genuine empirical methods when they introspect their experiences, appeal to their intuitions, or privilege considerations of system. The distinction commits to the special role of close reading, interpretation, historical explanation, and other empirical methods.

So described, first-order aesthetics might seem too daft a pursuit for anyone to need to look for reasons to go second-order. Indeed, many have reservations about the reliability of the first-order methods of analytic philosophy. Testing hypotheses against intuitive counterexamples yields good results only as long as intuitions are not confounded by irrelevant factors, and evidence abounds of confounders. We should be especially wary of the reliability of intuitive judgements about matters aesthetic. The choice of second-order aesthetics is overdetermined.

All the same, first-order aesthetics is powerfully attractive. Theories are products of an impulse towards unity, and the grand theories of aesthetic value that stand as monuments to more than two centuries of thought speak to the nature and special significance of the arts. Without them, no glue unifies the various arts and sets them apart. We are left to contemplate the “qualities that are specific to particular examples of the things we call arts—cinema, painting, ballet, poetry, folk song … in all their huge abundance and brindled variety.”

Here Steven Connor champions pluralism but also indicates what is at stake in theorizing about aesthetic value for those who want unity.

The rub is that second-order philosophy cannot deliver unity. Quite simply, there is no empirical study of all art that is not also a study of a great deal besides art. Look for empirical research on all and only art. You will find work in musicology, literary studies, art history (i.e. visual art history), and the anthropology, sociology, and psychology of music, story-telling, and images. (Ditto for the other arts.) You will also find work on imagination, creativity, and the like—phenomena over which art owns no monopoly. Put playfully, “in the cultural explanation game, every square marked ‘art’ is a shoot (or snake) leading down to an art kind or a ladder leading up to some more generic phenomenon.” Since there are no empirical studies of all art and only art, second-order philosophy can posit no unifying aesthetic theory of art. Those wary of the pluralist’s “huge abundance and brindled variety” must bank on first-order philosophy.

In sum, metaphysically-motivated skepticism about aesthetic value begins with theoretical overreach, with demanding more of a theory of aesthetic value than it could deliver, namely the unity of the arts. The overreach is then compounded by the need for first-order philosophy to supply a theory of aesthetic value independent of our best empirical knowledge. How better to undercut faith in the usefulness of aesthetic value attributions than by thinking of them in a way that cannot but cloud the concrete specificities of empirical arts scholarship?

Like any diagnosis, this diagnosis is vindicated only by its suggesting a therapy that works. Suppose that commitment to second-order philosophy trumps the desire for the kind of unity that might otherwise drive us to first-order philosophy (Lopes 2019). What are the prospects for a pluralist, second-order theory of aesthetic value?

**Prolegomena to any second-order aesthetics**

Second-order philosophy understands worldly phenomena by examining how the phenomena figure in empirical explanations. Precisely how it conducts itself involves more adroitness than algorithm: Joshua Dever rightly characterizes any choice of method as “skillful receptiveness to possible fruitful interactions” (Dever 2016). That said, two principles frame any decent attempt at second-order aesthetics.

A note on terms, to begin with. What are some reasons why Vikram Seth’s novel, *The Golden Gate*, is set in iambic tetrameter? What are some reasons why linear perspective painting caught on in quattrocento Italy? All across campus, we ask for reasons why. What are the reasons why ants have their social structure? What are the reasons why some benzene rings are aromatic? Let an explanation be an answer to any what-is-the-reason-why? question. Then interpretations and histories are explanations in the human sciences. We need not, and should not, cede explanation to the natural sciences.

Explanations generalize. Contemporary humanities especially vilifies the error of being “reductive.” By insinuation, generalizing is unacceptable in and of itself. However, it is as much an error to under-
generalize as to over-generalize: going too broad obscures important differences and going too narrow obscures important commonalities. We should alight on those generalizations that afford the most insight.

Judging what yields the best returns involves more adroitness than algorithm, but two more exact principles offer guidance. Even as they maintain some critical distance, second-order philosophers trust that empirical scholars, just by testing hypotheses against evidence, will ultimately locate the most insightful level of generality. Renouncing a priori assumptions about how broad or narrow to go, they defer to how empirical scholars carve up reality into categories. Thus, according to a match-explananda principle of second-order aesthetics, explananda for a theory should generalize over explananda for more empirical explanations. According to a match-explanans principle, theoretical explanans should generalize over explanans for more specific empirical explanans. In other words, the terms in which a theory explains worldly phenomena should be the very same terms as appear in ground-level, empirical explanations of the very same worldly phenomena.

Traditional theorizing about aesthetic value in service of theories of art overreaches because it disregards the directives to match explananda and match explanans.\textsuperscript{14} No empirical hypotheses take facts about the aesthetic value of all and only works of art as their explananda, and none perform their explanatory tasks by appeal to a generic concept of aesthetic value in art. There are only empirical hypotheses about aesthetic value in Baroque music or modernist poetry, which appeal only to the specificities of aesthetic value in Baroque music and modernist poetry. The problem with traditional theorizing about aesthetic value is not that it generalizes but that it goes too broad: differences obscured outweigh commonalities revealed (Kivy 1997).

Pluralists break aesthetic value free from art as a unified field with backing from second-order theorists, who renounce a priori assumptions about whether to go broad or narrow about aesthetic value. They ask, what is the right—that is, the most insightful—level of generality for theorizing about aesthetic value, once we have ceased to think of it as making art what it is? Need we go narrow, or might it pay off to go broad? If we cannot answer a priori, then we must heed what classes of fact need explaining and what classes of explanation show signs of promise.

**Practical values, in practice**

Giving up on art-centered approaches to aesthetic value leaves us with the “huge abundance and brindled variety” of the various arts, from painting and poetry to music and landscape architecture, but it also represents the arts as occupying a prominent corner of an aesthetic universe that they share with nature, scientific theories, all kinds of non-literary writing and image-making, religious and civic ritual, games, industrial design, interior decoration, clothing and cosmetics, fashion, horticulture, and animal breeding.\textsuperscript{15} Probably very few human activities are completely untouched by considerations of aesthetic value. *Homo sapiens is Homo aestheticus.*

Dizzying as it is, the aesthetic saturation of human life need not subvert tidy theorizing. Just as studies of creativity and imagination go awry when they ignore scientific creativity and imagination, studies of aesthetic value are also liable to go wrong when limited to the biased sample that is the arts. Going a step further, our best hope at understanding aesthetic value in the arts might lie precisely in looking beyond the arts. By embracing the breadth of the aesthetic, we can finally do justice to the arts’ brindled variety.

What there is consists in what makes a difference. Everything there is produces a ripple in the fabric of reality, impacting other things in ways that we can detect, however indirectly. Empirical scholars explain the differences that things make. If aesthetic values are difference-makers, then it falls to empirical arts scholars to explain the differences aesthetic values make. Pluralists simply insist that the differences need not be momentous. The understated quality of Alice Munro’s “Fits” makes a difference big enough to carry some weight in understanding it as literature. The mellow quality of a caldinho does not make anything like the same kind of difference.\textsuperscript{16} Nonetheless, in each case, being understated and being mellow are aesthetic values. Small differences are differences enough.

Therefore, guided by the match-explananda and match-explanans principles, we ask, what is generally true of the differences that aesthetic values make, and of explanations of those differences? With these questions, second-order aesthetics gets down to business. Here are two propositions that should be (and have sometimes been) accepted as starting points by second-order theorists.

First, aesthetic values make a specific kind of difference: they make a difference to what agents do. Aesthetic values might be theoretical (making a difference to what people think), but they are also practical. I tap my foot because the song is jaunty or I ask my students to write about Iris Murdoch’s “Sovereignty of the Good over Other Concepts” because it is thrilling. Acts done on the basis of attributing aesthetic merits or demerits are aesthetic acts; aesthetic values, so attributed, make a difference to aesthetic acts.

Second, aesthetic values make a difference to what agents do in the context of aesthetic practices (Walton 1970). The textbook example is Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (Gombrich 1960). In the context of Mondrian’s oeuvre, the painting is as
exuberant and it swings, but it is austere and cerebral in the context of mid-century abstraction. Since a curator’s aesthetic act of hanging it in a show is an act that takes into account its aesthetic qualities, how she acts depends on whether she is operating within the practice of De Stijl, or mid-century abstraction. Both art practices are also aesthetic practices, but not all aesthetic practices are art practices. Contrast what counts as cute in the breeding of pugs as against the kawaii aesthetic of Japanese youth.

**Aesthetic values are practical, and they are practiced**

An example of a study that perspicuously leverages these two propositions is Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Baxandall 1972). Some paintings of this period—some by Piero della Francesca in particular—are vivid and concrete. Their having these aesthetic values gives members of the practice of quattrocento painting reason to appreciate them in a certain way. We see this in how Baxandall explains their actions by appeal to the “period eye,” which is a “conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder.”

The “period eye” is, of course, a “practiced eye.” Members of different practices differ in their interpretation skills, category concepts, and habits of making inferences and drawing analogies. Since variations in cognitive style impact attention, hence appreciative experiences, they better equip some to meet the demands of works in a practice. In as much as a painter can only ask spectators to use the skills they have, spectators’ visual capacities are part of the painter’s medium.

Consider what Baxandall says about the capacity of members of the quattrocento merchant class for commercial gauging. In a time before standardized measures, anyone involved in business learned geometrical methods for gauging quantities. Baxandall quotes a contemporary textbook:

> There is a barrel, each of its ends being 2 bracci in diameter; the diameter at its bung is 2 1/4 bracci and halfway between bung and end it is 2 2/9 bracci. The barrel is 2 bracci long. What is its cubic measure?

This is like a pair of truncated cones. Square the diameter at the ends: $2 \times 2 = 4$. Then square the median diameter $2 2/9 \times 2 2/9 = 4 76/81$. Add them together: $8 76/81$. Multiply $2 \times 2 2/9 = 4 4/9$. Add this to $8 76/81 = 13 31/81$. Divide by $3 = 4 112/243 \ldots$ Now square $2 1/4 = 2 1/4 \times 2 1/4 = 5 1/16$. Add it to the square of the median diameter: $15 5/16 + 4 76/81 = 10 1/129$. Divide by $3: 5 1/3888$. Add it to the first result: $4 112/243 + 5 1/3888 = 9 1792/3888$. Multiply this by 11 and then divide by 14: the final result is $7 23600/54432$.

He dryly remarks, “it is a special intellectual world.”

What is special is the dizzying arithmetic, but also what precedes it, the automatic and comprehensive analysis of complex forms into combinations of regular geometrical solids. Quattrocento merchants brought their geometer’s skill to looking at pictures that were made to be looked at with the same trained eye. The upshot is a gain in vividness and concreteness.

The vignette portrays a scholar explaining how aesthetic values—being vivid and concrete—make a difference to what agents do in the context of a practice. The two explananda—what people do and where they do it—are reflected in Baxandall’s explanans, the practiced eye, a set of traits that make agents members of the practice. Members of the merchant class understood themselves as answerable to Piero’s expectation that they respond in a certain way, and Piero understood that they so understood themselves. Social practices just are mutual, and mutually reinforcing, expectations about how to act (Bicchieri 2006; Guala 2016).

Baxandall’s scholarship excavates the precise content of the expectations constitutive of the hub of activity that was the practice of quattrocento painting.

In general, then, aesthetic values make a difference to what agents do in the context of practices. To explain these facts, ground-level arts scholars appeal to practice-constituting, action-oriented traits and expectations. As a result, generalizing about explananda and explanans demands empirical attention to what agents do, to their traits, and to their expectations.

Pluralism foregrounds difference against a backdrop of commonality, where the commonality is not a glue that cements difference into unity. Our generalizations, that aesthetic values are practical and that they are practiced, conforming to the match-explananda and match-explanans principles, strike an insight-maximizing balance between difference and commonality. Yet they do not define art, for they apply only to specific artistic practices as special cases among a huge variety of aesthetic practices.

**Tools for thinking about aesthetic value**

A useful second-order aesthetics should provide a kit of conceptual tools for capturing how aesthetic values make a practical difference in pr actice. Presumably, aesthetic values make a difference to what people do by showing up in their awareness of their environment, including their social environment. Only having represented an item as understated or mellow do
they go on to act. An evaluation is simply a representation of an item as having a value. Where \( V \) is any aesthetic value,

an aesthetic evaluation is a state of mind that represents some item as \( V \).

Aesthetic evaluations can be beliefs ready to be conveyed in words or they can be experiences or affective states.\(^{22}\) From here it is a short step to a concept of an aesthetic act as an act to which aesthetic values make a difference. Aesthetic acts are acts done under the guidance of an aesthetic evaluation:

an aesthetic act is an act that goes as it does because of the agent’s aesthetic evaluation.

The idea is not to unpack what makes an aesthetic doing an act; it is to say what makes the act an aesthetic one in particular.

Aesthetic evaluations explain acts. The cook adjusts the masala, and the fact that he evaluates the caldinho as too mellow explains his act. The evaluation is an explanatory or motivating reason. By contrast, normative reasons are the worldly facts that justify what the agent does, when he acts well. The masala adjustment goes well only when the caldinho is, in fact, too mellow. All does not go well when the cook makes the adjustment, evaluating the caldinho as too mellow, though it is not too mellow. In good cases, an aesthetic evaluation motivates the very act that the agent has normative reason to perform.

A theory of aesthetic value answers the question, “what is aesthetic value?” by saying why facts about aesthetic value justify aesthetic acts.\(^{23}\) (It indirectly says why aesthetic evaluations motivate acts when the acts go well.) Why does the caldinho’s being too mellow mean that a cook has normative reason to adjust the masala and consequently act well when he is motivated to make the adjustment in the belief that the masala is too mellow? The answer lies in completing the proposition that,

the fact that an item is \( V \) is a normative aesthetic reason for an agent to perform an aesthetic act in context because . . .

The context is an aesthetic practice. After all, the caldinho is too mellow for Goan cuisine, not for Portuguese cuisine.

Different conceptions of aesthetic value fill in the dots in their own ways, and the next section sketches two examples. For now, what matters is that we have a set of conceptual tools to frame thinking about aesthetic value. Aesthetic evaluations, which motivate action, represent aesthetic values. Aesthetic values are features of items that justify agents’ doings. They figure in normative reasons for acting in the context of aesthetic practices. The framework homes in on what value is by exposing its essential ties to what justifies and motivates action in a context. Its basis is the second-order observation that aesthetic values make a practical difference, in practice.

### Two ways to go social

How neutral are the commitments to the match-explananda and match-explanans principles, to the observation that aesthetic values make a practical difference, in practice, and to the apparatus of reasons? Do they stack the decks in favor of some particular theory of aesthetic value? Do they offend commonplaces about aesthetic value or aesthetic evaluation?

The time has come to discharge a simplification. Being mellow, being thrilling, being understated, and being vivid and concrete are toy examples of aesthetic values. Few aesthetic values can be so directly named; most get picked out only through rich description, laden with figures of speech, structured by comparison.\(^{24}\) A New York Times critic once described Saul Bellow’s sentences as “double-breasted (Pahlka 2012).” Being double-breasted is an aesthetic value. Here is Chef Mark Miller on the taste of a raisin:

when you bite down, it is sweet in the beginning. It has a medium tempo and flavor – it becomes tannic on the edge, it gets a little bit juicier, and it gets highly accentuated sugars and a little bit dusty in the mid-palate over time. There’s a certain intensity that goes up. And then the sweetness dies off, and then the tannin dies off, and what you’re left with is a kind of seedy little bit of sweetness that follows through (Dornenburg and Page 1996).

Aesthetic evaluations need not represent values in subject–predicate declarative form. Though criticism need not concern aesthetic value, it is often needed to articulate it, where it is found.

Pluralists sho an theorizing away from an equation of artistic value with aesthetic value, so artistic practices are not just aesthetic practices. Other, non-aesthetic values make a difference to what people do in relation to works of art. What other values? Pluralists are open to different answers for different art media and different artistic traditions. Second-order art theory, like second-order aesthetics, might pin down some commonalities that frame but do not determine thinking about specifics.\(^{25}\) For now, the task is to capture the brindled specificities of aesthetic practices, including aesthetic practices of the arts.

In proof of concept, here are mere sketches, without arguments, of two theories of aesthetic value. Each says why the fact that an item has an aesthetic value is a normative aesthetic reason for an agent to perform an aesthetic act in the context of an aesthetic practice. One is new; the other, well established.

According to what has been the default theory at least since the eighteenth century, an item’s aesthetic
value is a property it has that disposes certain subjects to undergo a finally valuable experience.26 “Finally valuable experience” is jargon for “pleasure,” where pleasure is not limited to the realm of the senses. So, in the context of contemporary dance practices, a piece by Foofwa d’Imobilité is nonchalant in a disciplined sort of way. Members of the world of contemporary dance, equipped with the practiced eye, experience it so, and the experience is worth having for its own sake. Why does its disciplined nonchalance give them normative aesthetic reason to appreciate it? Answer: by appreciating it they have pleasurable experiences, and anyone always has some reason to get pleasure.

The default theory can also explain why the pleasure-seeking eye is trained up socially. Writing in 1751, Hume considered that our species,

has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy’d a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable (Hume 1975; Guyer 2005).27

Each has reason to shape their capacity for feeling pleasure so that they get pleasure from what also pleases their friends and neighbors. Pleasures converge in line with social formations. Writing in 2010, Andy Egan echoes the same thought, making the obvious point that “groups and subcultures are defined, at least in part, by the common aesthetic sensibilities of their members,” for sharing pleasure is “a substantial part of the process of building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and in establishing and maintaining ties to communities and groups” (Egan 2010). The best psychological models of pleasure confirm how it is plastic enough to do the job (Matthen 2018).28

Analytic philosophy is now returning to aesthetic value by recovering Hume’s insight about the sociality of pleasure, and also by crafting theories not centered on pleasure. Some are nascent (Nehamas 2007; Shelley 2010; Gorodetsky and Marcus 2018).29 One, the network theory, is well developed.30 Aesthetic values give agents reasons to act, but the default theory privileges one type of aesthetic act, namely appreciation. Refusing to privilege appreciation, the network theory gives equal priority to any act that is done under the guidance of an aesthetic evaluation, including acts of making, collecting, curating, editing, conserving, and documenting, just for a start. Each of these acts calls upon a distinct competence, and each is successful in distinct conditions. Aesthetic practices are networks of agents with complementary competences, who rely for their success on the competence of others. In order to coordinate with one another, they must share a conception of the (often changing) aesthetic good for the practice. They must coordinate on whether they are in a practice where Broadway Boogie Woogie is exuberant or one where it is austere.

Why does its being exuberant give a curator normative aesthetic reason to do this, not that? Answer: by doing this, not that, they are more likely to use their competence successfully, in a context where they rely on the competence of others, who see it as exuberant. After all, it is constitutive of acting that if you have any reason to act at all, then you have reason to succeed in acting, and if you have reason to succeed acting, then you have reason to use your competence (Sosa 2007). Aesthetic normativity is performance normativity.

Neither theory is implied by the general commitments that second-order aesthetics reads off ground-level scholarship. That at least one of these theories will not pan out does nothing to impeach the general commitments. Now is the time for an open mind about how aesthetic values make practical differences in practice. The proof of concept supplies nothing more than a reasonable expectation of one day being able to fashion a solid theoretical foundation for a pluralist penchant for a brindled aesthetic world.

Bad method fuels metaphysically-motivated skepticism about aesthetic value because it renders the stakes purely theoretical. The remedy is to think of aesthetic value as practical and as practiced, hence to think of it through the lens of scholarship attuned to the specificities of action in social context, hence to think of it pluralistically. Good theories always explain difference: they explain, at every level, from physics, to speciation, to aesthetic practices, why the world is not a homogenous gray soup. Among the specificities that scholars of the arts care about we may include the diversities of aesthetic value.

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Notes

1. From this one might infer that skepticism is never cogent—e.g. Wittgenstein (1969). Alternatively, one might isolate skeptical hypotheses as merely theoretical—e.g. DeRose (1995).

2. For a history of aesthetic value skepticism in art studies, see Prettejohn (2005).

3. The ball was set rolling by Passmore (1951). By the 1960s, the field had reoriented to work on representation, expression, imagination, interpretation, and the non-aesthetic dimensions of art.

4. Esp. Danto (1964). Cf. Danto (2003). For some reflections on the consequences for arts studies, see the exchange generated by Connor (2011), Altieri (2011); Dissanayake (2011), and Rose (2017).
5. Non-speculative metaphysics just is an articulation of our most fundamental methods of empirical inquiry. E.g. Quine (1953).
6. E.g. Davies (2004), ch. 1; Thomasson (2005, 2010).
7. Quine (1953).
8. Some professionally designated philosophers do practice true empirical methods, which they harness to build theory. They are second-order philosophers who rely on their own first-order work, rather than others. Examples include Wollheim (1987), Danzo (1981), Nussbaum (1992), Pippin (2013), and Costello and Lopes (2019).
9. E.g. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001). Cf. Williamson (2008).
10. Lopes, “Feckless Reason,” Aesthetics on the Edge, 43–62.
11. Connor, “Doing Without Art,” 55.
12. Lopes, Beyond Art, 66.
13. See Skow (2016). Two humanists who make these points crisply are Baxandall (1985) and Smith (2017a), ch. 1.
14. The implication is neither that there is no such thing art nor that there can be no correct theory of art. What follows is that art is a disjunctive phenomenon: art is painting or poetry or music or landscape architecture, etc. See Lopes, Beyond Art, chs 1 and 3.
15. The point is as hard to take seriously as it is easy to concede. See Smith (2017b).
16. Artifying the dish as “cuisine,” infiltrating the difference made by its being mellow, fails to do it justice. See Saito (2005).
17. Baxandall, Painting and Experience, 34.
18. Baxandall, Painting and Experience, 40.
19. Baxandall, Painting and Experience, 86.
20. E.g. Bicchieri (2006) and Guala (2016).
21. Lopes (2018b), ch. 2.
22. E.g. Tappolet (2016), Lopes, “In the Eye of the Beholder,” Aesthetics on the Edge, 148–69; and Stokes (2018).
23. Facts need not obtain independently of human acts, reactions, or practices. It is a (social) fact that US inflation is increasing, and it is a (social) fact that “sneachd” means snow in Scots Gaelic. The fact that inflation is increasing is normative reason not to buy bonds, and the fact that “sneachd” means snow in Scots Gaelic is normative reason to don boots when “sneachd” appears in the Lewis weather report. Likewise, it is a (social) fact that the masala is mellow in Goan cuisine, and that fact is a normative reason to add spice. It justifies the act of adding spice.
24. Smith, Film, Art, and the Third Culture, 205–16.
25. Lopes, Beyond Art, chs. 6–8.
26. Recently, Mothersill (1984); Walton (1993), Iseminger (2004), Levinson (2002), and Schaeffer (2015). Excellent overviews are Shelley (2019), and Van der Berg (2020).
27. Hume (1795). See also Guyer (2005).
28. See Matthen (2018).
29. E.g. Nehamas (2007), Shelley (2010), and Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).
30. Lopes, Being for Beauty.

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