

The Engagement Account of Aesthetic Value

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We behave oddly in our aesthetic lives. In other parts of our lives, we use some very powerful resources to form our judgments and beliefs. We trust experts. We trust doctors to tell us what medicine to take. And we make inferences. We look at a finite set of data points, and use them to make generalizations about the world.

But we seem to avoid these methods in aesthetic life. First, we often avoid trusting experts. Sure, experts can fill in the historical background, point out features for us to notice, and show us new interpretive options. But we don't trust art experts outright; we don't simply adopt their judgments wholesale. I am willing to trust my life to my doctor, to act on their say-so and take these drugs, even if I don't have no real understanding of how they work. But something would seem very odd about simply adopting the aesthetic judgments of an expert about jazz, even if I was pretty much a jazz novice. In aesthetic life, we supposed to think for ourselves — even if we are mere novices.

And we are supposed to avoid the scientific approach. When we reason inferentially, we look at specific pieces of evidence, discover patterns in them, and then use those patterns to form general principles. And then we use those principles to speed up reasoning. We draw conclusions about new objects and future events. I know this plane won't fall out of the sky when it takes off, because of inference from past experience. But we don't form aesthetic judgments through inference. Imagine somebody saying: "Well, I've listened to 50 Miles Davis songs. They were all fantastic. I haven't listened to Miles Davis' "Salt Peanuts", but I know it's fantastic too — based on generalizing from past experience."

Instead, we are supposed look at each artwork on its own terms, to grasp aesthetic qualities for ourselves. Why is this? Some have suggested that the answer lies in the metaphysics of aesthetic properties. According to such accounts, "beautiful", "tragic", "funny" aren't the kind of things we could ever graspable through the testimony of another. Nor are they the kinds of things we can find through scientific inference. They are some mysterious kind of property, which can only be grasped through direct experience. But it turns out to be quite difficult to say why that might be.¹

I offer an entirely different explanation. Beauty isn't some metaphysically

¹ This conversation here is long and twisty. Some inroads include Sibley (1959), Mothersill (1984), Hopkins (2001, 2011), Budd (2003), Cavendon-Taylor (2017), Nguyen (2017), and Lord (2019).

weird substance. We could potentially find out which things are tragic or elegant through testimony or through inference. But we *choose not to*. We avoid these methods. Aesthetic appreciation is a constructed social practice, in which we avoid using inference and testimony, in order to construct a particular kind of activity.²

Testimony and inference are very efficient paths to knowledge. Why would we avoid them for aesthetic judgment? I suggest it is because our *purposes* in aesthetic life differs from our purposes in ordinary empirical life. With the rest of life, we are usually interested in getting our judgments and beliefs right. But in aesthetic life, we care more about going through the *process* of engaging with an aesthetic object than we do about actually having the right answers. Call this the *engagement account* of aesthetic value.

In aesthetic life, we care about being plunged into the process of perceiving, exploring, interpreting for ourselves. Testimony and scientific inferences are useful shortcuts. They let us to skip over doing the work for ourselves in each instance, and proceed as quickly as possible to the right answers. This is why we use them in scientific life. We don't want have to redo all of science for ourselves, from scratch, when confronted with each new airplane engine, virus, or antibiotic. But with aesthetics, we actually don't want to skip over the process of particular engagement. That process is the point.

Aesthetic appreciation, I am claiming, has a similar motivational structure to that of a game. Bernard Suits offers a useful analysis of games. Here's the simplified, "portable" version of his account:

Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.
(Suits [1978] 2014, 43)

For Suits, games involves adopting a goal, and then taking on restrictions to that goal. In a marathon, we don't drive a car to the finish line. In basketball, we don't use a stepladder to pass the ball through the hoop. The point of these activities, then, is not to achieve some simple outcome by any means necessary. The point is to achieve them inside a specified set of constraints. Games are, thinks Suits, inefficient by nature. We know that the point of a marathon is not simply to get to the finish line, because if that were it, we would take the most efficient path. We would take shortcuts, or a bicycle, or call a cab. But we don't do so because in a game, we care about arriving at that goal through a particular constrained process. Games are constructed struggles. We designate goals and obstacles in order

² The analysis I'm offering here draws on two longer articles. In "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement" (2019b), I introduce the engagement account of aesthetic value to solve the puzzle about aesthetic testimony. In "Art as a Shelter from Science", I extend the engagement account to solve the puzzle about aesthetic inference.

to craft a particular form of struggle.

Lets add one more wrinkle to Suits' account. I've suggested Suits shows us that there are two different motivations for playing games. In *achievement play*, we care about winning the game. In *striving play*, we care about the struggle. In striving play, we temporarily adopt an interest in winning for the sake of the absorbed struggle. We don't care really care about winning, from a larger perspective — we just temporarily bring ourselves to care, so that we can be absorbed in that delicious struggle. You might say: in ordinary life, we take the means for the sake of the ends. But in striving play, we take on the ends for the sake of the means.³

Aesthetic appreciation, I am suggesting, has a similar motivational structure. We don't actually care about just having correct judgments about art. We care about being plunged into the process of aesthetic engagement. Otherwise we would take the most efficient pathway to correct judgments: testimony, inference. Our avoidance of these efficient pathways reveals that our real interest in aesthetic appreciation is in the process, and not the outcome.

Those odd features of our aesthetic life, then, turn out not to arise from essential features of aesthetic objects, but rather from contingent features of a particular social practice. And this helps make sense of the context-dependence of our willingness to use aesthetic testimony and inference. It is in one specific context — one local, culturally specific practice of aesthetic appreciation — that we avoid inference in testimony. In other contexts, we help ourselves to these efficient pathways. Artists use inference, to decide where to put that next mark or which note to play next. Curators and art historians use testimony. Aesthetic appreciation is but one game we can play with aesthetic objects.

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³ I draw here on my analysis of the motivational structure of games (Nguyen 2019a, 2020).

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