

Aesthetic values are distal versions of practical values

Tom Cochrane

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I believe the first thing to say about value is that it is something that we do. We value things. There is no value out there independent of valuing beings. This is the most metaphysically parsimonious way to understand what's going on.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly compatible with this view, and most fitting the character of our valuing activities, that we are focused on things or events, and not merely our experiences of those things or events. I value my children, not (necessarily) my experience of my children. I value the symphony, not (necessarily) my experience of the symphony.¹ Moreover, we can talk about how the qualities of objects or events afford or sustain our valuing activities. Different qualities are suited to sustain different sorts of valuing activities.

Thus when it comes to analysing a value, one part will involve understanding the psychology of the valuing activity, and the other part will involve identifying those qualities that suit the activity. These two parts should complement each other.

Focusing now on aesthetic value, there is an overarching category of aesthetic value which encompasses various specific values including, but not limited to- the beautiful, the sublime, the comic, the dramatic, the tragic and, (perhaps controversially) the erotic. If we want a good theory of aesthetic value, our best practice is to look in detail at as many of these as we can, and make some generalisations on this basis. This is something that I've tried to do in a recent work (Cochrane 2021). Here I offer four major observations.

First, in common with many other philosophers on this issue, I believe aesthetic values are final values. That is, we value the thing for its own sake and not because it leads to something else valuable. Be careful here not to confuse final value and intrinsic value. Intrinsic value is independent of context, while final value can very much take in the context. For example, I value the mountain for its own sake, but part of my valuing may involve grasping the tectonic

¹ I thus disagree with experience-directed theories of aesthetic value such as Stecker's (2019, Ch.2) and agree with object-directed theories such as Shelley's (2010).

forces that created it. This is also relevant when we value artworks in part by considering the virtues of the production process.

Second, also not too distant from other views, I think we value in an *objectifying* manner. What I mean by this is that the basis of our value is necessarily and sufficiently focused on the object's qualities, and not on how well the object suits my, or my community's practical goals. The way I like to put this point is that I regard the object as simply good, rather than good for me, or good for my community. I believe this to be the decisive distinction between aesthetic value and both practical and moral value. I also find it decidedly interesting to consider how our sense of the objective world may originate in our aesthetic activities.

Third, and here is where it gets more distinctive to me, I think we should analyse each aesthetic value as the *distal version* of a practical value. The motivation for this claim is to make sense of the evolutionary provenance of our aesthetic activities and how they integrate with the rest of our lives. My idea is that humans have various practical drives, such as the drive for power, the drive for knowledge, and the drive for social attachment. The distal version of a drive is then a way in which we get attuned towards *signals* of things that will potentially satisfy that drive. We have evolved the capacity to get psychological reward from an object, prior to any practical acquisition of the thing, and merely in virtue of perceiving or contemplating its qualities.

For example, we can analyse the sublime as a distal version of our practical drive for power. To put it crudely, the sublime object looks powerful. And we can get a rewarding sense of that power despite not having become more practically powerful in any way. Consider also beauty. In line with broadly Kantian considerations, I analyse this as a distal version of our practical drive for knowledge. The object looks knowable; its harmony of form is particularly receptive to our understanding. This sense of potentiality is related, but strictly distinct from practically knowing the object. Finally consider tragic value. The central value here is the presentation of sympathetic characters. We can get a rewarding sense of a good person, despite not establishing any practical relationship with them.

The great benefit of such distal values is that they orient us towards the object. Conscious feelings of reward move us towards more practical interactions with the object (and other similar objects). This makes sense of why humans (and probably other animals) have

developed the capacity to value things aesthetically: It helps us to acquire practical values more effectively. At the same time, it opens up the entire world as a source of psychological reward. It also underpins the distinctive sharability of aesthetic value. My distal valuing does not impede your distal valuing.

The fourth general feature I discern in the various aesthetic values is that each seems to rest on what I call an ‘essential tension’. In each case, there seems to be a challenge that we need to overcome. The greater the challenge, the greater the potential reward. But the challenge cannot be so great that we become unable to access the reward. Thus in beauty, the reward of unity (and thereby knowability) is in tension with complexity. In the sublime, the reward of power is in tension with the object’s hostility to our senses or imagination. In the tragic, the reward of sympathy is in tension with acknowledging the target’s suffering or flaws. In addition, these various aesthetic values are in tension with each other. For example, the psychology and qualities involved in appreciating the sublime can undermine the psychology and qualities involved in appreciating the comic. A major issue when making an aesthetically pleasing artwork is to manage these tensions.

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