

Aesthetic Commitments and Aesthetic Obligations

Anthony Cross, Texas State University

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ABSTRACT

Resolving to finish reading a novel, staying true to your punk style, or dedicating your life to an artistic project: these are examples of aesthetic commitments. I develop an account of the nature of such commitments, and I argue that they are significant insofar as they help us manage the temporally extended nature of our aesthetic agency and our relationships with aesthetic objects. At the same time, focusing on aesthetic commitments can give us a better grasp on the nature of aesthetic normativity; this is because, in making aesthetic commitments, we are capable of giving aesthetic concerns the weight of obligation. I argue that appealing to aesthetic commitments allows us to account for the existence of aesthetic obligations as well as their grounding. I conclude by arguing that, although the aesthetic domain is a domain of play and freedom of choice, there is nevertheless an important place in it for both aesthetic commitments and the aesthetic obligations they generate.

I

Consider Bernard Williams's example of Gauguin—a man who forsakes the impartial claims of morality and opts instead for a life in which he can become the painter he aspires to be. (Williams, 1981: 22-23) Gauguin, it might be said, makes a *commitment* to this life—a commitment that leads him to neglect his family and move to Tahiti in pursuit of his artistic vision. Much

has been written about the nature and value of such commitments generally.¹ Philosophical consensus recognizes that commitments can make an important contribution to our well-being; indeed, this seems to be the kernel of the objections to modern ethical theory developed by Williams, Stocker, Wolf, and others, who note that impartial moral requirements seem to rule out the possibility of any such personal commitments. (Stocker, 1976; Williams, 1973; Wolf, 1982)

In Williams's example, notice that Gaugin makes an *aesthetic* commitment. He commits himself to his artistic project—a commitment he makes as a result of the aesthetic values he is trying to realize through his painting. For Williams, this is only important to the extent that it can serve as a foil against the impartial claims of morality; Williams is interested in whether these commitments can provide justification for turning one's back on morality. Indeed, despite the recognition of the importance of commitments generally, there has been scant attention paid to aesthetic commitments as such, outside of discussions in which they feature primarily as contrast cases for moral commitments.

Aesthetic commitments, I argue below, are relatively commonplace in our aesthetic lives; this is because they play an important role in managing the temporal dimension of our aesthetic agency in the context of our relationships with aesthetic objects. However, aesthetic commitments deserve attention not only because they play an important role in structuring our aesthetic lives; beyond this, focusing on aesthetic commitments can give us a better grasp on the nature of aesthetic normativity. This is because, in making aesthetic commitments, we are capable of giving aesthetic concerns the weight of *obligation*.

¹ Notable discussions include (Calhoun, 2009; Chang, 2013; Chartier, 2017; Schaubert, 1996).

It is controversial whether aesthetic obligations exist.² According to what we might call the *standard picture* of aesthetic normativity, aesthetic value generates an abundance of *reasons* for individuals to respond in particular ways—by performing acts of appreciation or creation, by acquiring beliefs about value, or by experiencing emotions such as wonder, delight, or even repulsion. However, these reasons are non-binding; we are free to choose among aesthetic objects without blame, and we are never required to engage with any particular aesthetic objects or individuals. Therefore, to characterize the aesthetic domain as one of commitment and obligation pulls against this common conception of the domain as one of freedom, choice, and play—a domain whose chief value lies in our ability to sample and experiment free from the grasp of requirements, moral or otherwise. What’s more, if we appeal to the standard picture it is difficult to understand how aesthetic obligations might be grounded; if our aesthetic reasons are non-binding, how might we ever acquire aesthetic obligations in the first place?

I argue that appealing to aesthetic commitments allows us to account for the existence of aesthetic obligations and their grounding. Furthermore, while I think that the conception of the aesthetic domain as one of freedom and play has merit, I argue in the final section of the paper that there is nevertheless an important place in it for both aesthetic commitments and the aesthetic obligations they generate.

II

What exactly is an aesthetic commitment? Start with the idea of a commitment in general. I understand a commitment to involve a judgment on the part of an agent to see to it that they are

² For skepticism regarding the idea of an aesthetic obligation, see (Dyck, 2021; Hampshire, 1954; Nussbaum, 1990: 132). For recent attempts to defend the existence of aesthetic obligations, see (Cross, 2017; Eaton, 2008; Kubala, 2018; McGonigal, 2018; Whiting, 2021).

engaged in some end; it is both an intention to pursue the end in question as well as a second-order intention to see to it that this first-order intention is sustained. Commitments are therefore attempts to sustain engagement with and achievement of our ends, even when our desires flag or when circumstances change to make doing so more difficult.

I'm only going to focus on active commitments rather than passive commitments; active commitments are those which are the result of some sort of judgment on the part of an agent, whereas passive commitments are, as Nancy Schaubert puts it, simply relations that one finds oneself in due to one's beliefs or concerns. (Schauber, 1996: 121) Active commitments are, for that reason, both voluntary and rationally evaluable. One can both choose to make the commitment and evaluate one's reasons for doing so. I am not entirely a voluntarist about commitments; I do think that some of our commitments may be passive. However, as will become clear below, most if not all aesthetic commitments are active commitments.

I'll also be focusing on commitments made *to* individuals—what Ruth Chang calls “moral” commitments—although perhaps it would be better to refer to them as person-directed commitments. (Chang, 2013: 76-79) Such commitments make us *accountable* to others and correspondingly generate obligations for us. At the same time, they are *releasable*. If I promise you that I'll pick you up from the airport, I have an obligation to pick you up. I am furthermore accountable to you; it would be perfectly appropriate for you to be angry or disappointed if I fail to pick you up. On the other hand, you might release me from my commitment if you recognize that driving to the airport would be a major inconvenience and if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you to take a cab. While we generally commit ourselves to other persons in this way, we also often make these sorts of commitments *to ourselves*; we make resolutions, self-promises, and other self-directed commitments that involve similar structures of obligation, releasability, and accountability, albeit the

individual to whom we are accountable is our self.³

An *aesthetic* commitment is an active commitment made with respect to some aesthetic object. I understand the term “object” here very broadly—the category includes discrete objects such as artworks, but it also includes aesthetic genres or categories, particular traditions or practices, and perhaps even certain more general aesthetic concepts like “art” or “beauty”. What distinguishes aesthetic commitments is the fact that the end to which one is committed involves substantive engagement with some aesthetic object or other.⁴ Let me make things more concrete with several examples.

Richard Moran has introduced an example from Proust in which the narrator Marcel vows to always appreciate the beauty of the hawthorn trees in bloom in the spring:

On the morning of our departure . . . my mother, after searching everywhere for me, found me standing in tears on the steep little path close to Tansonville, bidding farewell to my hawthorns, clasping their sharp branches in my arms.... “Oh, my poor little hawthorns,” I was assuring them through my sobs, “it isn’t you who want to make me unhappy, to force me to leave you. You, you’ve never done me any harm. So I shall always love you.” and, drying my eyes, I promised them . . . I would never copy the foolish example of other men, but that even in Paris, on fine spring days, instead of paying calls and listening to silly talk, I would set off for the country to see the first hawthorn-trees in bloom. (Moran, 2012: 305-308).

Much of Marcel’s life, Moran argues, is subsequently structured around his response to the beauty of the hawthorns and his commitment to be sensitive to it and to appreciate them. One might quibble about just *what* it is that Marcel is committed to here—whether it’s a commitment to

³ Cf. (Chartier, 2017: 2-3; Rosati, 2011)

⁴ I am punting on what Dominic Lopes would call the “Demarcation Question” here; I don’t plan to offer a full account of how to demarcate aesthetic from non-aesthetic values. (Lopes, 2019: 465) However, as I understand the notion of an aesthetic commitment, the object’s aesthetic properties or values must feature in the explanation for *why* we form the commitment in the first place. So, for example, committing oneself to punk rock for the sake of being popular wouldn’t count as an aesthetic commitment. Thanks to the editors of this journal for encouraging me to clarify this point.

appreciate the hawthorn bushes themselves, or a more general commitment to appreciating beautiful objects—but I think there’s no question that Marcel’s aim is to make an aesthetic commitment.

A similar, if less highfalutin, case is the young punk who makes a solemn vow never to sell out and give up on their punk scene. Consider Greg Bellerose, writing in *McSweeney’s* about his relationship with the Clash’s “Death or Glory”, which he heard for the first time as a teenager while in his friend’s car:

The moment I heard the Clash roar out of that awful stereo, I realized I didn’t know anything yet. On that day, the Clash were not a political band from England. I managed to miss that part entirely. I was a kid from an American suburb who skipped gym to drink warm beer with a guy who could actually lose a six-pack in his car. I had bigger problems than politics. It was the urgency and the anger in Joe Strummer’s voice that struck me. It was the undeniable appeal of a statement like “Death or Glory” shouted over loud, angry guitars that hit me the hardest. It was the defiance. That afternoon was the first of many times that I would write “Death or Glory” on the front of my locker with a large black magic marker. Each night the janitor would erase it and every day I would write it again. I doubt battling the high-school janitor with a slogan and a Sharpie was the type of defiance the Clash had in mind. But at the time, it was the best I could do. (Bellerose, 2004)

Bellerose found an aesthetic of defiance in the song and committed himself to embodying it in the only way he knew how—through his (rather humorous) ongoing battle with the high-school janitor.

Artists often make commitments to their work—a point clearly on display in the discussion of Gauguin above.⁵ Artistic manifestos serve as public declarations of these aesthetic commitments. Consider Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, in which she resolves to practice maintenance activities—sweeping floors, dusting, cooking—as art in contrast to the male-centric ideals of “development” art: “my working will be the work”, as she puts it. (Ukeles, 1969)

⁵ Arnold Berleant discusses such responsibilities as part of a more general “morality of creativity” in (Berleant, 1977: 199). For a more recent discussion, cf. (Mills, 2018).

Ukeles's manifesto is a personal one, but the history of art is littered with collective manifestos that aim to speak for creative movements. Consider F.T. Marinetti's well-known futurist manifesto, in which he and his comrades commit themselves rather prosaically to making art that expresses the speed and violence of modernity:

We shall sing of the great multitudes who are roused up by work, by pleasure, or by rebellion; of the many-hued, many-voiced tides of revolution in our modern capitals; of the pulsating, nightly ardour of arsenals and shipyards, ablaze with their violent electric moons; of railway stations, voraciously devouring smoke-belching serpents; of workshops hanging from the clouds by their twisted threads of smoke; of bridges which, like giant gymnasts, bestride the rivers, flashing in the sunlight like gleaming knives; of intrepid steamships that sniff out the horizon; of broad-breasted locomotives, champing on the wheels like enormous steel horses, bridled with pipes; and of the lissom flight of the aeroplane, whose propeller flutters like a flag in the wind, seeming to applaud, like a crowd excited. (Danchev, 2011: 1-8)

Appreciators make similar commitments to appreciative projects: being a committed fan of an artist or genre means that one will go to major lengths to fully understand and appreciate their work. But this may not be all that's required: Thi Nguyen has argued that jazz fans, in addition to developing the technical competency required to appreciate contemporary jazz, must also make commitments to the genre as one in which jazz artists will pursue ideals of aesthetic sincerity. (Nguyen) This has the implication that jazz appreciators must be open to often radical changes in style that might occur when artists are encouraged to follow their muses.

What is the status of each of these aesthetic commitments? Who are they commitments *to*, and what accounts for their normative force? I submit that we should understand these as commitments made to oneself in the context of one's relationship with an aesthetic object.⁶ Consider a variation of the Bellerose case above: a young punk, who, having developed a love for her scene,

⁶ Another option is to regard these as what Ruth Chang calls "internal" commitments—roughly, commitments that one makes individually to some particular object. (Chang, 2013: 76-77) I find little to disagree with in Chang's discussion of internal commitments except for the fact that it misses out on the way that individual commitments are ultimately derivative of (and retain the normative structure of) interpersonal moral commitments. More on this below.

makes a solemn oath to remain committed to it and never to sell out. This aesthetic commitment functions similarly to a self-promise. Failing to live up to her commitment by selling out would make it appropriate for her to feel a set of reactive attitudes like anger or blame towards herself. The commitment also gives her presumptively authoritative reasons not to, e.g. skip punk shows for the opera. The same story can account for the commitments that artists have to their work; for Gauguin, staying with his family in Paris rather than traveling to Tahiti would constitute a failure to live up to his commitment, and would similarly make it reasonable for him to feel anger or guilt.

So far, I've sketched out an account of the nature of aesthetic commitments. A fair question at this point is the following: *why* would we ever want to make such commitments in the first place? What is their value for us as aesthetic agents? The general answer is that aesthetic commitments allow us to fix certain dimensions of our practical identity; in doing so, they help us secure a number of goods associated with managing the temporally extended nature of our aesthetic agency and our relationships with aesthetic objects and ends.

Before expanding on this idea, let me first focus on aesthetic *choice* rather than aesthetic commitment. Kevin Melchionne has argued that aesthetic choice is the primary means by which we create opportunities for exposure to aesthetic value. Most of our aesthetic choices are low stakes and rather insignificant, but over time the set of our aesthetic choices sets us on a distinct path through the world of aesthetic value. (Melchionne, 2017) It's also a rather commonplace idea that our aesthetic choices play an important role in constructing and expressing our identities. Alexander Nehamas has written persuasively about this aspect of our engagement with beauty:

What we find beautiful is central to our taste or sensibility, and taste or sensibility is manifested whenever we act on our own and not only along lines already drawn by routine and convention.... The values of aesthetics are the badges of our particularities. They are marks of distinction, whose collective name, "Beauty," names those attractions that exceed our ability to articulate them in terms that we already understand, and promise to reveal to us something ever seen before. (Nehamas, 2007: 85-86)

So, by way of our choices and actions in the aesthetic domain, we express our sensibilities—and, if we are lucky, we do so in a way that reveals us as individuals with some kind of style or taste that might be aesthetically valuable in its own right.⁷

I think that there's something deeply appealing about this line of thought—but, at least as I've started to develop it, it doesn't seem to require any appeal to the notion of an aesthetic commitment. After all, one could chart a path through the world of aesthetic value and develop one's identity by way of the aesthetic choices one makes without ever taking oneself to be committed to any particular aesthetic objects. So why might we need to make aesthetic commitments at all?

If aesthetic choices allow us to chart a path through the world of aesthetic value and help us to create our identities, I want to suggest that aesthetic commitments are means of *anchoring* our aesthetic choices—and our aesthetic identities—in time. This is something that we tend to do in cases where we worry that future developments might threaten to change us in some way that might cause us to drift away from our identity as it currently stands. Consider the example of marriage: in most marriage vows, a couple commits themselves to their relationships *come what may*—that is, in full realization that both participants in the relationship will go through significant changes that will alter the individuals and might even undermine their motivation to continue in the relationship. Forming a commitment is a way to protect against this possibility. As Cheshire Calhoun argues, “a commitment is both an intention to engage with something (a person, relationship, goal, activity, identity, etc.) and a preparedness to see to it that that intention to engage persists.” (Calhoun, 2009: 618) Similarly, we commit ourselves to aesthetic objects as a way to fix their positions in our lives over time. These commitments are means of protecting our relationships

⁷ For more on style as an aesthetic ideal see (Riggle, 2015)

with these objects against events that might change us or otherwise draw us away from them. I think that fixing our identities over time in this way is valuable for a number of distinct but related reasons.

First, in committing ourselves to an aesthetic object in this way, we aim to preserve a relationship that we consider valuable in its own right as well as whatever valuable contribution this relationship makes in establishing our identity. Consider again the young punk. In committing herself to her punk scene, she not only takes the scene itself to be valuable enough to commit herself over time; she also thinks that there is something especially important or valuable about *being a person who loves punk and who is part of the punk scene*. There might be a number of reasons why she thinks this; perhaps it contributes to her distinctiveness as an individual, unifies her personal style, or gives her a sense of meaning insofar as she is a part of an ongoing artistic practice and tradition. The same is true of Marcel's commitment to the hawthorn trees: in some sense, Marcel doesn't just want to remain committed to the trees themselves. Rather, he sees value in remaining the *kind of individual* who finds beauty in them, rather than something else. Thus, commitment offers a means of preserving our identity over time and protecting it against future threat: it is a response to the sense that something valuable would be lost were one to drift away from one's current identity.

Admittedly, the above rationale for making an aesthetic commitment might seem to only apply to those who make aesthetic matters central to their lives. While this is a fair concern, I think that there are further reasons to make aesthetic commitments even if one doesn't take such relationships as central to defining one's practical identity.

Aesthetic commitments allow us to be better appreciators of aesthetic objects. We live in a

world of aesthetic riches: there are countless objects of aesthetic value, and we have (perhaps enticing) reasons to appreciate nearly all of them. However, appreciating an object's aesthetic value is not always easy or immediate: in many cases, it may involve substantial and extended agential involvement. Some artworks are, in Matthew Strohl's terminology, aesthetically "disobliging"—that is, they require effort to engage with aesthetically, including substantial investments of time and focus, substantial background knowledge, and finely developed appreciative skills in order to fully appreciate them. (Strohl, 2019). One risk of aesthetic life is that of distraction—not distraction by non-aesthetic matters, but rather distraction by *other aesthetically valuable objects*, such as those which are more aesthetically obliging. The worry is that fully appreciating the value of Proust will be beyond me if I am constantly being enticed by genre fiction; and I might never get around to watching Terence Malick's films if I have the option of a constant stream of Nicolas Cage movies on Netflix. Going further, the very disobligingness of some art can itself lead us towards more obliging art; the very difficulty of Malick makes the Nick Cage films *even more* enticing. In the face of these concerns—and out of an abiding interest in fully appreciating these objects—I might make a commitment, e.g. no more new Nicolas Cage movies until I've made it through most of Malick. In making this sort of commitment to some aesthetic object, we aim to block other enticements entirely by way of the presumptively decisive nature of aesthetic commitments; in doing so, we can secure the possibility of a more extended and robust appreciative engagement with the object over time. Anchoring our identity by way of an aesthetic commitment therefore makes room for the possibility of fuller and richer appreciative relationships with aesthetic objects. As Strohl has argued, there is always some risk of aesthetic akrasia—a failure to remain committed to the aesthetic object in the face of enticement by other aesthetic goods. But the possibility of aesthetic akrasia doesn't undermine the force of aesthetic commitments, just as weakness of the

will in other domains doesn't undermine our ability to form commitments more generally.

An additional reason for forming an aesthetic commitment is that such commitments might allow us to “domesticate” time by familiarizing the future contours of our aesthetic lives. Calhoun has argued that this is true of commitments generally:

Commitments are ways of laying down tracks through time in much the way that selecting routine travel routes is a way of laying down tracks in space. And just as tracks through space determine not only how one gets from point A to point B but also the contents of one's spatial experience—what landmarks one will pass, whether one will see wild turkeys or smell hamburgers grilling on the way—so agential tracks through time determine more than what one will be doing. They determine the contents of one's temporal experience across and at different moments of time. (Calhoun, 2009: 640-641)

This can be valuable insofar as the familiar is comforting; we gain a sense of control over our future insofar as we have a sense for what shape that future will take. Samuel Scheffler has also argued that this value of “domesticating” time accounts for the formation of personal routines:

By ordering the same coffee and pastry at the same café each morning, I domesticate a slice of time. In other words, I dedicate that slice of time each day to a specific purpose of my choosing, and in so doing I lay claim to it. It becomes “my time”, as people sometimes say. And since a routine is by its nature temporally extended, “my time” extends beyond a single day. The routine establishes a kind of temporal corridor, which passes through the succession of days, and which “belongs” to me. So although we cannot establish a home in time by strict analogy to a home in space, we can establish something that serves some of the same function... the effect is to make ourselves feel *at home* in the world. (Scheffler, 2010: 297)

What I want to suggest is that commitments to aesthetic objects can play a similar role: they offer us the possibility of projecting our identity forward in time—a possibility that might be comforting or familiarizing insofar as it gives shape to our future. There is something valuable, I think, about knowing that, throughout my life, I will re-read *The Lord of the Rings*, listen to John Fahey, or spend time with the photographs of Walker Evans. I know that my future will, in part, consist of these kinds of activities—because of the commitments I've formed—and furthermore I know that when I engage with them I will also be able to connect my experiences at that time to my previous experiences.

Admittedly, not everyone will be drawn to the values of temporal domestication; as Calhoun

argues, such valuing may simply reflect one's "temporal style." While some might prefer the familiarity and comfort brought to the future by ongoing commitments, others might instead prefer the unpredictable or the novel. (Calhoun, 2009: 641) I think that many approach their aesthetic lives in this way—always on to the next new thing. But the point of my argument above is just that some might value a more predictable and familiar future—and that commitments to aesthetic objects is one means of securing this.

Summing up, aesthetic commitments are an important means of giving a more fixed shape to our aesthetic lives; this allows us to fix certain aspects of our aesthetic character, pursue more extended appreciative and creative projects, and find comfort in familiar forms of aesthetic experience and engagement. This is not to say that aesthetic commitments are without risk; there are several important concerns about such commitments to discuss: call these the challenge of *bad* aesthetic commitments and the *distinctiveness* challenge for aesthetic commitments.

Let's start with the challenge of *bad* aesthetic commitments. Suppose that I vow to remain ever faithful to the oeuvre of Thomas Kinkade, or that I am thoroughly committed to some morally bankrupt artistic practice, such as performing minstrel shows in blackface. Wouldn't such commitments make my aesthetic life—and my life in general—actively worse? At best, these commitments would cut me off from engagement with other, richer aesthetic objects; at worst, they would lock me into an identity that is unoriginal, uninteresting, or even morally problematic. I think that there are real risks here that shouldn't be downplayed; depending on their centrality in one's life, making bad aesthetic commitments can be just as problematic as picking the wrong friends to stick with or the wrong cause to fight for.⁸

⁸ On the risks inherent in commitments of friendship, see (Cocking & Kennett, 2000; Nehamas, 2010).

That said, there are two aspects of aesthetic commitments that help to mitigate this concern. The first is that aesthetic commitments—like active commitments in general—are subject to rational appraisal. Commitments involve a judgment that we *should* try to sustain our engagement with and pursuit of some end. Ideally, an aesthetic commitment is the result of a judgment that, all things considered, we have good reason to commit ourselves to the aesthetic object in this way. This judgment will depend on a number of factors, including the aesthetic value of the object itself as well as the values realized in my ongoing, committed relationship with it. It's of course possible that I might err in this judgment; I might be mistaken about the contribution that some aesthetic object makes to my life. But I think that a minimally reflective and thoughtful aesthetic agent will be suitably sensitive to these matters to generally avoid such commitments.

The second aspect of aesthetic commitments that can mitigate our concern about bad aesthetic commitments is that aesthetic commitments, insofar as they are active commitments made to oneself, are also subject to self-release. If I realize that my commitment to Thomas Kinkade is, all things considered, a commitment that I should not have made, then I can release myself from it because it is a commitment I have made *to myself*. Importantly, although we can release ourselves from such commitments, this doesn't show that in the absence of such a release, the commitments aren't genuine. This is apparent in the fact that we mark a difference between violating one's commitment to oneself and releasing oneself from it. Suppose that I find myself bingeing the latest Nick Cage B-movie and realize that I've failed in my commitment to watching more Malick. Contrast this with a case in which I've decided that Malick is pretentious garbage and explicitly release myself from the commitment. In the former case, it seems that regret or disappointment towards myself would be reasonable—whereas, in the latter case, even if I've misjudged Malick, no such self-directed reactive attitudes would be appropriate. Importantly, releasing yourself from your

aesthetic commitments requires substantive reflection and deliberation about the value of your relationship with the aesthetic object and its place in your life; it isn't something that you do at the drop of a hat.

There is also what we can call the *distinctiveness challenge* to aesthetic commitments: Why, all things considered, should we make aesthetic commitments, rather than commitments to other persons, moral causes, etc.? This worry can be made more pressing by noting that most of the values that I've argued are central to making aesthetic commitments—identity protection, appreciative investment, and temporal domestication—can also be realized by way of *non-aesthetic* commitments as well. Is there any reason why we might therefore be attracted to forming *aesthetic* commitments in particular? This is, I think, a deep question that won't admit of easy answers: how, quite generally, should we organize and structure our lives? I suspect that most would agree that a life entirely lacking in sustained, committed relationships with aesthetic objects would in some sense be lacking—both *aesthetically*, insofar as such commitments seem to provide a basis for robust, sustained appreciation, but also *all things considered*, insofar as we take such sustained and committed relationships with aesthetic objects to make a valuable contribution to a life well lived. But whether such commitments are distinctive in a way that gives us a further reason to form them as opposed to other non-aesthetic commitments is a question that I'll leave open here.

III

Above, I've sketched out an account of the nature of aesthetic commitments and argued that they play an important role in giving shape to our aesthetic lives. If I am correct about this, then appealing to aesthetic commitments can also help us enrich our account of aesthetic normativity—

roughly, it can help us make more sense of the kinds of normative claims that aesthetic considerations make on us, including the idea that in some cases we may have aesthetic obligations.

According to what I've called the standard picture of aesthetic normativity, there are objects in the world that possess aesthetic value. This value generates reasons for individuals to respond in particular ways—by performing acts of appreciation or creation, by acquiring beliefs about value, or by experiencing emotions such as wonder, delight, or even repulsion. By appealing to the machinery of reasons, by which I mean considerations that count in favor of particular actions and attitudes, it would appear that the standard picture can accommodate just about the entirety of the kinds of claims that the aesthetic makes on our lives. The standard picture of aesthetic normativity makes no space for the idea of an aesthetic obligation. Although we live in a world of aesthetic value, and while we have reasons to appreciate it or otherwise respond to it, it isn't wrong to ignore aesthetic value if one has more reason to do something else, nor are our aesthetic reasons presumptively decisive.

I'll pause here to specify exactly which sense of "obligation" I have in mind: Obligations are distinguished in at least the following ways: first, obligations present themselves as authoritative or presumptively-decisive; although they are in principle capable of being overridden or outweighed, they present themselves as considerations in virtue of which we *must* act.⁹ Second, failing to meet your obligations to another makes it appropriate for them to blame you and hold you responsible for your wrongdoing; it also makes it appropriate for you to experience guilt or remorse at having failed in your obligation. (Wallace, 1994: 74-76) In these respects, obligations go beyond what we simply have reason to do. Obligations, in my view, are a distinctive kind of consideration

⁹ Here I follow (Scheffler, 1997: 196) in characterizing obligations as presumptively decisive.

from what you merely ought to do in light of the reasons that you have. Not everything that we have reason to do will strike us as presumptively decisive, nor will such considerations always be linked to reactive attitudes such as blame, guilt, or remorse.¹⁰ Such “heavyweight” obligations are par for the course of our moral lives: many have argued that we must appeal to the normative machinery of obligations to account for the kinds of claims that ordinary moral phenomena like promising make on us.

One reason to think that the standard picture is correct—and that there are no aesthetic obligations—is that it isn’t clear exactly how aesthetic obligations might be grounded. Consider the proposal that aesthetic obligations are grounded in the aesthetic value of objects. As straightforward as this response is, it isn’t very promising. First, it doesn’t seem to capture the idea that your obligations are generally owed *to* individuals who can hold you responsible for their violation. Moran puts the point nicely in discussing Marcel’s response to the hawthorns:

Really, what sense could there possibly be in “keeping faith” with anything like a bunch of hawthorn trees in bloom, however beautiful, as if one could have obligations of some sort with respect to them? Well, for that matter, how is it that he takes himself to be addressing the hawthorns in the first place, bidding farewell, making to them a declaration of love, promising them to come see them again? (Moran, 2012: 307)

Objects with aesthetic value—including hawthorn trees—don’t seem capable of holding us accountable for violating our obligations to them. A second concern—which I will return to in much more detail in the following section—is that aesthetic value simply doesn’t generate obligations in the relevant sense; aesthetic reasons entice or count in favor, but they are never obligatory. If this is a fair characterization of aesthetic reasons, then we can’t appeal to an object’s aesthetic value as

¹⁰ For elaboration on this distinction—as well as a skeptical take on the idea of moral obligation in general—see (Williams, 1985: 182-196).

a source of obligation.

A second option is to argue that aesthetic obligations are grounded in our obligations to other persons. Of course, we *do* have all sorts of obligations to other persons, and many of these obligations involve objects with aesthetic value. I take myself to have an obligation not to needlessly uproot the hawthorn trees that the local horticulturist has painstakingly cultivated. Doing so wouldn't just involve destruction of objects with aesthetic value; it would also directly wrong the horticulturist. The problem with this approach is that it doesn't seem to track our intuitions about some of the cases above: our focus isn't on what we owe to other people. Rather, we seem to be focused on aesthetic objects themselves and our relationships with them.

Appealing to aesthetic commitments provides us with an alternative means of grounding aesthetic obligations. In the context of our relationships with aesthetic objects—perhaps relationships that demonstrate a kind of love or concern for that object—we make commitments to ourselves to maintain this love, concern, and engagement.¹¹ It is a self-regarding mechanism—a commitment to oneself to maintain one's love and concern—that accounts for why we have aesthetic obligations towards some objects, rather than simply reasons with respect to them. This self-regarding aspect also helps us get a grip on who aesthetic obligations are owed to. They are, strictly speaking, owed to ourselves—or, at the very least, they are sourced in the values associated with who we are and with what we take to be centrally important to our identities. This also allows the relationship account to avoid difficulties associated with taking aesthetic objects like artworks, genres, or natural objects to be direct bearers of obligations, while at the same time avoiding the counterintuitive

¹¹ This is similar to the approach I developed previously in (Cross, 2017); a major difference here is that I aim to be explicit that it is an aesthetic *commitment* that generates obligations, rather than simply love or concern for some aesthetic object on its own. I doubt that there are *sui generis* duties of love of the sort discussed in (Wallace, 2012).

idea that aesthetic obligations are owed to other persons.

On this approach, the grounds of all aesthetic obligations are ultimately self-directed commitments that function similarly to self-promises.¹² However, these commitments are generally made in response to pre-existing relationships with aesthetic objects that we love or care about. One doesn't start from scratch, as it were, by creating one's identity through self-promises. Rather, one recognizes that a relationship with an object in which one is already invested—emotionally and practically—is worthy of one's future commitment. The commitments that ground aesthetic obligations are generally made in light of our pre-existing aesthetic loves. This mitigates the possibility of alienating aesthetic obligations—that is, commitments that ground obligations which are completely out of step with our existing aesthetic loves and concerns.

IV

I've argued that we can appeal to aesthetic commitments as a way to ground aesthetic obligations. Doing so would allow us to expand the set of normative concepts that we might appeal to in making sense of the claims that aesthetic objects might make on us; rather than appealing simply to the idea of aesthetic *reasons* that count in favor of particular modes of attention and engagement, we might instead appeal to genuinely aesthetic *obligations*—presumptively decisive considerations in virtue of which we must act.

A significant objection to my proposal is that the obligations I've focused on aren't distinctively aesthetic. In a recent paper, John Dyck argues that if aesthetic obligations are to be genuinely aesthetic, then they must be obligations that we hold for aesthetic reasons. (Dyck, 2021) However,

¹² (Kubala, 2018) also defends a self-promising account of the grounding of aesthetic obligations. Kubala's view is largely in agreement with the view that I develop here; the difference between our views is that I stress that such commitments occur largely within the context of significant relationships with artworks and other aesthetic objects.

Dyck argues, aesthetic reasons never generate obligations; rather they are entirely what Jonathan Dancy refers to as enticing reasons—reasons that count in favor of particular actions or attitudes, but which never take us to an ought. (Dancy, 2004: 21; 2006) If Dyck is correct, then aesthetic obligations can't be genuinely aesthetic, insofar as they can't be grounded entirely in aesthetic reasons.

According to Dancy, enticing reasons are to be distinguished from “preemptory” or non-enticing reasons by way of their outputs: whereas preemptory reasons take us to “oughts”, enticing reasons take us only to “bests.” (Dancy, 2006: 116) So, while your friend's suffering is a reason that you *ought* to help them out, the peaty flavor of Islay whisky is a reason why it would be *best* for you to drink it—although you're not *required* to do so. The central issue, then, is that there is no sense in which aesthetic considerations would never take us to an ought or a requirement; it would follow that these reasons could never ground aesthetic obligations. But is this a fair characterization of aesthetic reasons?

One reason to think that it is a fair characterization depends on *aesthetic hedonism*. Aesthetic hedonism is the idea that all aesthetic value is constitutively related to pleasure; the normativity of all aesthetic reasons is therefore the normativity of pleasure. (Van der Berg, 2020) Generally, aesthetic hedonists will accept the position that the aesthetic value of any particular object is to be understood in terms of its capacity to generate pleasure in a suitably idealized spectator. If aesthetic hedonism were true, then we might think that all aesthetic reasons would be enticing insofar as reasons of pleasure are enticing. No one is *required* to pursue pleasure, although we might have very strong reasons to maximize the quantity or quality of our pleasure.¹³

¹³ This is just the sort of reasoning that Jerrold Levinson invokes in arguing that we should make our preferences

Dyck provides a second reason to think that all aesthetic reasons are enticing reasons, and that therefore there are no aesthetic oughts. He argues that conceiving of aesthetic reasons as enticing sits well with our conception of the aesthetic domain as one of play, experimentation, and creativity; we are supposedly free in this domain to choose to do whatever we feel like, regardless of whether doing so would be best. (Dyck, 2021: 12-15) Others have stressed that the aesthetic domain is generally a domain of choice—rather than a domain of obligation or requirement—and that our aesthetic lives are most fulfilling when they involve such choices. (Melchionne, 2017)¹⁴

I don't think that either of these points fully motivates the claim that there are no aesthetic oughts. Let's return to aesthetic hedonism: Even if aesthetic hedonism were true, it's not clear that all reasons grounded in pleasure are merely enticing. As the hedonic utilitarian would be quick to emphasize, there is a sense in which you *ought* to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Thus we might appeal to an 'ought' of most reason in the aesthetic domain; you ought to do whatever will maximize the quantity and quality of your pleasure.

Moving back a step, it's not clear that aesthetic hedonism best captures the normative structure of the aesthetic domain. Recent years have seen numerous critiques of aesthetic hedonism; pleasure alone, it is argued, can't account for all of the aesthetic reasons that we have.¹⁵ Instead, we must appeal to the other normative grounds for aesthetic reasons; some options include the normativity of achievement, (Lopes, 2018) the value of beauty, understood as a kind of normative primitive,

match those of the Humean ideal critic in (Levinson, 2002). Importantly, Levinson notes that these reasons, while strong, are defeasible and certainly not obligatory.

¹⁴ The idea of the aesthetic domain as a domain of choice is both distinctively Western and distinctively modern—like the very concept of the aesthetic itself. Many societies have maintained aesthetic practices in which there is less of an emphasis on choice and individuality; they have instead placed a greater focus on the importance of tradition and community within these practices. In such societies, there would perhaps be much less difficulty in entertaining the idea of an aesthetic obligation. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this observation.

¹⁵ For useful summaries of these critiques, cf. (Shelley, 2018; Van der Berg, 2020)

(Gorodeisky, 2021) and the value of autonomous engagement. (Nguyen, 2020) It isn't my task here to settle the debate between aesthetic hedonism and its critics; I only need to point out that there are plausible alternatives to aesthetic hedonism, and that if any of these alternatives are true, then it wouldn't be clear that we should assume that all aesthetic reasons are enticing on the grounds that they are ultimately to be explained as reasons of pleasure.

This line of argument might seem to push us towards thinking that the aesthetic value of objects can *directly* generate aesthetic obligations; recall that I dismissed this approach previously in favor of grounding aesthetic obligations in aesthetic commitments. Perhaps achievement, the value of beauty, or autonomy might make it the case that we ought to perform certain actions with respect to aesthetic objects. While I am amenable to this line of thought, I think that it runs afoul of the second consideration mentioned above—the idea that the aesthetic domain is a domain of choice, rather than requirement. I think that this idea is compelling; we should resist the full moralization of the aesthetic domain. While there may be aesthetic 'oughts' sourced in aesthetic value, we should not think that failing to live up to them is grounds for guilt, remorse, shame, or other "heavy-duty" reactive attitudes; nor should we think of such considerations as presumptively decisive in the way I've characterized obligations above. As Dominic Lopes has put the point, "morality has no lock on normativity, and not all normativity is heavy-duty normativity... We wonder what we should do, even when there is no dilemma in sight, nothing serious at stake, and no impending guilt or shame. We wonder what we should do whenever we have an aesthetic problem to solve." (Lopes, 2018: 40) So, I grant that there is a sense in which we really ought to perform one aesthetic action rather than another that is grounded directly in aesthetic value.¹⁶ However, if Lopes is right,

¹⁶ For further defense of the claim that there are such aesthetic oughts, cf. (King, 2018).

these ‘oughts’ are ultimately pretty lightweight; it is up to us to determine whether to do what we aesthetically ought, and we are free to choose the extent to which aesthetic value shapes and structures our lives.

Notice, however, that it is compatible with thinking of the aesthetic domain as a domain of play, freedom and choice to also think that in such a domain we might choose freely to bind ourselves, to make commitments, and to incur obligations. In broadest outline, my thinking is the following: the natural home of obligation in the heavy-weight sense I’ve distinguished is the moral domain. We incur obligations to others as a result of the promises and other commitments we make, and as part of the normative expectations that we engender in other persons through our interactions with them. In the aesthetic domain, it is open for us to adapt the normative structure of moralized obligation for our own purposes by applying it to our relationships with aesthetic objects. There is no sense in which such obligations are forced upon us; no one is required to commit themselves to the appreciation of beauty or to the development of rich relationships with aesthetic objects. However, making commitments to aesthetic objects that ground heavy-weight obligations may be beneficial for us, and lead to richer aesthetic lives; indeed, Nietzsche argues that central to creativity and artistic freedom is the self-imposition of constraint and necessity upon one’s actions. (Nietzsche, 2002: , §188) In the context of such commitments, we might have obligations to aesthetic objects in the heavy-weight sense I’ve outlined above—that is, such obligations could be both presumptively decisive and appropriately linked to the reactive attitudes. However, they would ultimately be obligatory only in virtue of the commitments that we freely make to ourselves.

But—to return to the initial objection—are such obligations genuinely *aesthetic*, if what ultimately explains them is a self-directed commitment? A first line of response to this objection is to

argue that, at some level, aesthetic obligations must be at least partially grounded in aesthetic reasons.¹⁷ Part of the normative explanation for why we take ourselves to be aesthetically obligated with respect to some object must be the object's aesthetic properties. Consider an analogy: the explanation for why one establishes a relationship with a friend must be the friend's qualities that attracted one in the first place. Of course, there are other individuals with similar qualities—and so, there must be some further reason why one is bound to one's friend in particular, such as a commitment to one's friend in the context of one's relationship with them.¹⁸ Similarly, on my view, what accounts for our initial investment in a relationship with an aesthetic object must be that object's aesthetic properties. However, granting my argument above that aesthetic value on its own doesn't ground heavy duty obligations, what establishes aesthetic obligations with respect to the object must be something over and above the object's aesthetic properties.

A second response is more concessive: perhaps there is nothing distinctively aesthetic about aesthetic obligations, besides the fact that they are obligations with respect to aesthetic objects.¹⁹ I think that this is a concession we can welcome, if only because it helps illuminate the way that, for some, relationships with aesthetic objects can be just as meaningful—and just as practically significant—as relationships with other persons. Stanley Cavell, speaking for an “us” that consists largely of such art-lovers, makes this especially clear:

Objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people—and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They mean something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do. People devote their lives, sometimes sacrifice them, to producing such objects just in order that they will have such consequences; and we do not think they are mad for doing so. (Cavell, 2002: 197-198)

¹⁷ This is similar to the argument developed in (McGonigal, 2018: 928)

¹⁸ This is, in outline, the argument offered in (Kolodny, 2003) in response to what Kolodny refers to as the “quality theory” of love.

¹⁹ Kubala offers a similar response in (Kubala, 2018: 283-284).

If Cavell is correct about the significance that at least some individuals attach to their relationships with aesthetic objects, then it should be no surprise to find that these individuals commit themselves to these relationships—and acquire obligations with respect to them—in just the same way that others do in relationships to other persons.

V

By way of conclusion, let me give a brief overview of the nature and value of aesthetic commitments and the obligations they generate. Start with what I've called the standard picture of aesthetic normativity: some objects, in virtue of their aesthetic value, generate reasons for us to engage with them in particular ways. This story can accommodate a great deal of the ordinary phenomena of our aesthetic lives: we face an embarrassment of aesthetic riches, and we are free to choose among them as we see fit. However, we sometimes commit ourselves to aesthetic objects; such commitments, aside from being practically significant, might also come to be central to our identities. Not everyone makes this sort of commitment, and there is nothing wrong if one fails to do so. However, I think that aesthetic commitments are fairly common in our aesthetic lives; and when we have formed them, they give rise to genuine obligations no different in principle from the obligations that we form in the context of other kinds of meaningful relationships. Aesthetic commitments are important means of safeguarding our identities over time; they give shape to our aesthetic lives and enable richer and more stable relationships with aesthetic objects and ends.

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