

Aesthetic agency

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1 Introduction

Engagements with aesthetic value pervade human life. We choose to wear these shoes because they beautifully match the dress; we travel to Petra on account of its beauty or we recommend Fiona Apple’s *Fetch The Bolt Cutters* as an excellent album, rich with allusions, poignant lyrics, and sweeping rhythms. Our aesthetic engagements appear to be as significant to our lives as human beings as our theoretical inquiries and practical engagements. But is there anything worthy of the name *aesthetic agency*?

Even though the term ‘agency’ is said in many ways, one widespread assumption behind otherwise different philosophical discussions of agency might aptly be called the “Practical Approach to Agency.” The literature is characterized by this approach in extensively identifying ‘agency’ with the will, and, more specifically, with the capacity for intentional action. On this view, we exercise agency where we exercise voluntary control.¹ This identification likely explains why until recently there has been no discussion of *aesthetic agency*. For traditionally, aesthetics has focused not on action, but on appreciation.

But identifying agency with the will is unfortunate since it fails to do justice to the way that human beings are taken to exercise agency over much more than their voluntary attitudes. We standardly attribute beliefs, emotions, desires, and other conative and affective attitudes, including aesthetic appreciation to people’s agency, and rationally criticize them when these

attitudes are inapt. The Practical Approach is unfaithful to this ubiquitous phenomenon. Fortunately, we need not abide by the Practical Approach, but can develop and adopt an alternative: the Authority Approach to rational agency. (This entry focuses on human rational agency since the particular aesthetic phenomena at stake are distinctively *human* phenomena.)

This alternative does not only do justice to the widespread practice of rationally assessing, reactively responding to, and holding people responsible for beliefs, emotions, and acts of aesthetic appreciation—a practice to which the Practical Approach is unfaithful—but also preserves the grain of truth in the Practical Approach: the intuition that agency is shaped by rational sensitivity and activity, and that it is subject to rational assessment, criticism, and praise. This is mainly because this alternative approach preserves, explains, and deepens the relation between human agency and reason.

2 Aesthetic Agency in the Literature

It is only very recently that the notion of aesthetic agency has been explored and developed in different contexts.

For example, John Dick (ms.) argues for what he calls Aesthetic Evaluative Agency. On his view, we exercise agency in aesthetic evaluation insofar as we can *choose* or *decide* upon one evaluation among several possible ones. We can and often do exercise the *will*, he argues, and have direct voluntary control over many (though not all) of our aesthetic evaluations.

Thi C. Nguyen (2020) argues that reflection on the aesthetic experiences and values of games sheds light on the nature of *practical* agency in general, particularly on the unity of practical agency and the temporality and structure of motivation.

Putting forward different notions of aesthetic agency, Susan Wolf and Jonathan Gingerich have challenged (independently of each other, and in different ways) what they regard

as the unjustified moralized character of discussions of agency, namely, the narrow focus of these discussions on moral agency and moral responsibility. Gingerich (ms.) argues that philosophical work on agency has unjustifiably ignored the significance and ubiquity of actions that are pursued in light of the human drive toward creativity, and actions that express ideals of personal style. The result falls short of a pluralism about agency, which Gingerich deems more faithful to the phenomena.

Wolf (2015, 2016) argues that the standard primacy of moral responsibility in philosophical discussions fails to do justice to the centrality and the depth of what she calls aesthetic responsibility, by which she refers *primarily* to the responsibility that artists bear toward the works they *create*, responsibility, she argues, that we respond to with reactive attitudes. Sometimes, though, Wolf suggests that aesthetic responsibility and thus aesthetic agency are wider than what artists exercise when they create, encompassing also the responsibility people bear, not for creatively acting but also for being charming, or having humor.

Dominic McIver Lopes has done most to put the idea of aesthetic agency on center stage. In spite of the long history of dissociating aesthetic value from action, Lopes argues the best way to explore the value of aesthetic goods is in terms of the aesthetic actions of experts in different aesthetic practices. It's time, he argues, for aesthetics to go practical. On Lopes's view, the reasons that aesthetic value gives us (Lopes's "aesthetic reasons") are, like other kinds of reasons, reasons to act in ways that would count as an accomplishment in the relevant practice. We have reasons to pursue aesthetic goods, he argues, since, ideally, this pursuit would be an achievement (in a particular practice, given its norms etc.) (e.g., Lopes 2018: 127). Thus, for Lopes, aesthetic normativity is, what he calls, "plain vanilla normativity." Aesthetic reasons are

the same as the reasons we have for acting in any domain: reasons to excel in a particular practice in this domain. This is, on his view, why aesthetic value is a *value*: because it gives reasons for actions. When we act on such aesthetic reasons, we exercise aesthetic agency. We are aesthetic agents, then, when we act for aesthetic reasons, reasons to act in ways that would, ideally, count as an achievement.

All these accounts put pressure either on philosophical aesthetics or on the literature on agency outside of aesthetics (and in some cases on both) in various valuable ways. None of them, though (other than an implicit suggestion from Wolf)² challenges the Practical Approach: they all take for granted the assumption that agency is a matter of the will. But this assumption (a) is unfaithful to actual practice, and (b) must be challenged were we to develop an account of genuine *aesthetic* agency. This is because of the primacy of appreciation in aesthetics, where by appreciation is meant a cognitive-affective attitude that involves consciousness of the object as meriting appreciation and of itself as merited by the object (Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Gorodeisky 2021a). This primacy will here be explained in terms of (i) merit, warrant, success, and (ii) intelligibility.

2.1 Primacy of appreciation: merit, warrant, success

The normative support for actions in pursuit of the aesthetic value of an item depends on, and is explained by, the normative support for the appreciation of the item. This does *not* mean that actions in pursuit of the aesthetic value of an object are warranted only if they support/promote/enhance appreciation. Rather, the argument is that an item that does not warrant aesthetic appreciation has no aesthetic value (since having it *just is* warranting appreciation). Given that it has no aesthetic value, no action in pursuit of such value is warranted *qua* pursuing this value. The primacy is transcendental: warrant of appreciation is the condition of the

possibility of (un)warranted aesthetic actions. Without the former, the latter could not be (un)warranted as actions in pursuit of *aesthetic value* (though they may be warranted on other grounds).

Consider reasons and justifications first. There are always reasons for appreciating aesthetically valuable objects (even if commonly *through* actions), but not reasons for acting on behalf of their aesthetic value *independently* of appreciation. Relatedly, aesthetically valuable objects fundamentally ground reasons for appreciating them, but only derivatively, insofar as they ground reasons for appreciation, they may also ground reasons for various different actions. In other words, actions in promotion of the object's aesthetic value are justified insofar as, and because, aesthetically appreciating this object is justified. Actions and the normative support for them bear on whether an object is aesthetically valuable only *indirectly* via appreciation and the normative support for it. If facts about an object did not rationally support appreciation, they would not rationally support acting in ways that promote this value. For example, translating Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* to English on account of their aesthetic excellence is justified only if, and because, the facts that are taken to justify this action also justify aesthetic appreciation.

This dependency of warrant is supported in part by the oddity of statements such as: "There are aesthetic reasons to exhibit Kara Walker's 'The Jubilant Martyrs of Obsolescence and Ruin' on account of its *aesthetic value*³ but there are no reasons to aesthetically appreciate it." They are odd plausibly because of the logic of merit and responsiveness in this domain.

So consider merit now. Aesthetically valuable objects fundamentally merit appreciation, and only *derivatively*, insofar as they merit appreciation, they may also merit other actions. This may be grounded in the logic of success in this domain. Perhaps the normative support for

actions depends on, and is explained by, the normative support for appreciation because nothing short of appreciation hits the mark of success in response to aesthetically valuable objects: nothing other than appreciation (e.g., mere action devoid of appreciation) counts as being *responsive* to an object's *aesthetic* value just as nothing other than respect (e.g., mere action devoid of respect) counts as being *responsive* to the value of a person *qua* person. Consider the ways we respond to those who fail to appreciate what is to be appreciated and to follow our aesthetic recommendation with anything short of appreciation. Merely acting on behalf of an object's aesthetic value *without* appreciating it falls short of hitting the mark of success of aesthetic recommendations.⁴ It is a reason for disappointment. But appreciating an aesthetically valuable object with no *separate* action on its behalf is no reason for disappointment. For example, if you tell me, following my recommendation, that you read Lucia Berlin's *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, and believe me that it is aesthetically excellent, but did not like it, was not even inclined to finish the collection or to recommend it to others—in short if you don't experience the cognitive-affective attitude that we standardly call appreciation—I'd most likely be disappointed, thinking that I failed to achieve the aim of my aesthetic recommendation. But if you loved the book, without seeking out Berlin's other books or even seeking to deepen your appreciation through reviews, this is no reason for the same kind of disappointment. Your appreciation of the book marks proper responsiveness to its aesthetic value. The aim of aesthetic recommendations is appreciation, and only derivatively, on the basis of one's appreciation, other, separate actions.

Notice that the view that aesthetic value *fundamentally* merits aesthetic appreciation is not a denial that it merits other attitudes too, actions particularly. Clearly, aesthetically valuable objects standardly merit many actions in promotion of their value: some merit translation, some

merit criticism, some merit editing, some merit showing, some merit currenting, some merit preservation, and so on and so forth. But the aesthetic value of items merits such ways of practically promoting it only insofar as, and because, it merits appreciation. This is manifested by our practices of recommending, conversing about, and critiquing aesthetically valuable items, by the fact that there are always reasons for appreciating aesthetically valuable objects (even if most commonly through actions), but not reasons for acting on their behalf *independently* of appreciating them, and by the related oddity of certain statements.

2.2 Primacy of appreciation: intelligibility

Actions performed on aesthetic objects and in aesthetic practices depend on appreciation, not only in terms of warrant but also in so far as they are not intelligible as *aesthetic* actions and practices independently of appreciation. Nor can their objects, without great difficulty, be understood as *aesthetic* independently of appreciation. We cannot assume that curators, editors, and so forth exercise aesthetic agency because they act on *aesthetic* objects or properties since it is doubtful that we can specify what objects or properties are *aesthetic* independently of the aesthetic appreciation that these objects fundamentally merit. The ‘aesthetic’ as such, cannot, without great difficulty, be characterized by any set of properties or objects independently of a reference to appreciation. This often goes unnoticed. The standard characterization of the aesthetic is in terms of the properties that are taken to be paradigmatically aesthetic, like beauty, elegance, gracefulness, ugliness, and garishness (e.g., Meskin 2004; Lopes 2018). But this is doomed.

First, most of the concepts of these properties can also be used non-aesthetically and the concepts of many other properties can be used aesthetically. Thus, they don’t capture what is *aesthetic* about aesthetic value, objects, and properties and derivatively about the actions and

practices that center on these. In addition, these properties can both enhance *and* detract from the aesthetic value of any object: a dance piece can be aesthetically bad because it is elegant and a painting could be aesthetically great because it is garish (to mention just a couple). Thus, the so-called paradigmatic aesthetic value properties fail to characterize aesthetic *value*, and to distinguish positive from negative aesthetic evaluation. Finally, characterizing the aesthetic by this limited set of properties makes it extremely hard to accommodate the great variety of objects of aesthetic value and the great variety of the properties that realize this value, that is, the fact that briskness and sharpness and wit and even boringness and painfulness may contribute to or detract from the overall aesthetic value of an object, that is, could be used *aesthetically*.

But we can characterize the aesthetic as that which merits a particular kind of (dis)appreciation. Accordingly, objects and properties are aesthetic insofar as they merit and fundamentally ground reasons for the cognitive-affective attitude of (dis)appreciation. Aesthetic actions and aesthetic practices are those performed on or center around these objects and properties. Of course, we will need to give an account of the distinctive nature of *aesthetic* appreciation (that does not beg the question) but this has been done (e.g., Kant [1790]2000; Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Gorodeisky 2021a).

The essential role of appreciation in characterizing anything that may count as aesthetic and the fact that nothing short of it or independent of it counts as aesthetic responsiveness point to the *derivative* nature of actions and the primacy of appreciation in the aesthetic domain. This seems hard to deny. Even those who argue against the primacy of aesthetic appreciation admit: “appreciation is the key to many ... aesthetic practices” (Lopes 2018: 209); “no one would accept the claim that ‘Ping is dainty’ but nobody ever has reason to appreciate him!” (Lopes 2018: 37).

Since aesthetic actions *depend* on appreciation as explained above, we have genuine aesthetic agency only if we can exercise agency in acts of a capacity that is *different from the will*: the rational-affective capacity for appreciation. Without an account of agency exercised in appreciation, we lack *any* account of genuine *aesthetic* agency. At best, we would have accounts of *practical* agency, exercised upon a certain set of objects, properties, or in certain practices. But we saw that it is implausible that we can get a grip on what makes objects, properties, actions, and practices *aesthetic* independently of the (dis)appreciation that they merit. This primacy of appreciation requires that we challenge the Practical Approach to aesthetic agency, and search for an Aesthetic Approach: we must understand how we may exercise agency even when aesthetically appreciating.

First, though, a few clarifications.

First, the primacy of appreciation does not imply that aesthetic value is the value of the appreciation that it affords, as held by proponents of what is known as “empiricism of aesthetic value” (e.g., Shelley 2010). The Aesthetic Approach to aesthetic agency is *not* committed to such empiricism. Rather, the proposed view *denies* that what makes objects of aesthetic value aesthetically valuable is their capacity to afford finally valuable experiences.

Second, a detailed account of what *aesthetic* appreciation is, how it differs from other kinds of appreciation, and how it can characterize objects of aesthetic value and aesthetic value properties is clearly needed. But, again, such an account is available. (e.g., Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Gorodeisky 2021a).

Third, appreciation is primary but *not* exclusive. The proposed view neither undermines nor discounts the significance of aesthetic actions and practices. Of course, actions are of utmost importance in the aesthetic domain. The aesthetic would be unthinkable and unrecognizable

without artists, acts of artistic creation, and the actions of curators, editors, landscapers, and so forth. Rather than undermining these, the emphasis on the agency we exercise in aesthetic appreciation is meant, first, to pave the way for a more adequate approach to rational agency in general, and, second, it alone can make room for a genuine *aesthetic* agency since, as we saw, actions are “aesthetic” only derivatively insofar as they center around those that *merit (dis)appreciation*. A genuine form of aesthetic agency is a form of agency exercised in aesthetic appreciation.

3 Is Agency Practical?

Perhaps the identification of agency with the will is partly grounded in the apt thought that agency is required for a kind of responsibility that goes with rational assessment: one can be assessed for an appropriate/inappropriate, merited/unmerited attitude, and is responsible for this attitude if and only if this attitude is an exercise of one’s (rational) agency. Notice that attitudes can be legitimately criticized or praised along the lines just mentioned only if they are sensitive to considerations of what is appropriate, merited, or called for. Perhaps the Practical Approach to agency is based on a slide from these apt considerations, through the thought that intentional actions are shaped by deliberation, to the conclusion that agency is reduced to intentional action. But this is infelicitous: there are human attitudes besides intentional actions that are similarly sensitive and evaluative.

The relevant responsibility is not merely causal as the kind of responsibility alluded to when we say that the crushing tree limb was responsible for smashing Ashley’s car. Nor is it meant third-personally to refer to the kind of responsibility that we have for things we own, like a car, or things we can exert external influence over, like a dog under our care.⁵ Rather, the kind of responsibility that requires rational agency is the one reserved only to human beings⁶ as

authors:⁷ responsibility over what we can (dis)avow when subject to rational reflection or criticism. Non-human animals clearly act, and perhaps can have the other attitudes for which we take human beings to be responsible. But we do not praise or criticize them for these attitudes; we do not take them to authorize these attitudes in a way that allows for (dis)avowal; and so, we don't hold them responsible for their actions and attitudes in the same way that we hold people responsible. But we do, pervasively, assess people, respond to them reactively, and hold them responsible for attitudes that we take to be exercises of their agency.

This sense of agency likely gets to the core of our human nature. But why do we think that it is reduced to the capacity for *intentional action*? Identifying agency with voluntary control excludes an important dimension of the relevant kind of assessment and responsibility. After all, we assess and criticize the man who believes that homosexuality is a sin. We take him to be responsible for his false belief and for changing it no less than people are responsible for their actions. We can legitimately demand that he disavow this belief and reconsider what to believe. We view Michael as responsible for feeling contempt against all people of color. Rational criticism, blame, moral outrage, and a demand to disavow these attitudes are as appropriate in these cases as they are in cases of intentional actions.

And the relevant assessment is not necessarily *moral*. Even if we don't necessarily *blame* people for, say, an inapt grief (over the loss of the person's favorite soccer team), inappropriate anger (say with one's mom), or an unmerited aesthetic appreciation (say, disappreciating Knausgård's *My Struggle* or appreciating *Downtown Abbie*), we do assess, respond reactively, and often criticize people for having a variety of inapt, unwarranted, or unmerited, though amoral, emotions, feelings, desires, aesthetic appreciations, and perhaps other affective and conative attitudes, and demand that they disavow those attitudes by reconsidering what to feel,

desire, or appreciate. We take these (amoral) attitudes that are *not under our voluntary control* to be expressions of our *rational agency*: we act, interact, speak, and react *pace* the Practical Approach to agency.

I focus here on emotions since aesthetic appreciation is affective: a cognitive kind of feeling that presents its object as meriting appreciation and involves an awareness of itself as merited by its object (Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Gorodeisky 2021a). But an increasing number of philosophers convincingly argue that other attitudes that are not under voluntary control, like beliefs, desires, and even our noticing and neglecting, are exercises of rational agency, for which we are responsible (Moran 2001; Smith 2005; Tenenbaum 2007; Brewer 2009; Boyle 2010; Boyle and Lavin 2010; Yao 2019, and Marcus in this volume).

On the face of it, identifying agency with voluntary control is unwarranted. What is, then, the sense of agency that allows only people to be (i) subject to rational assessment and reactive attitudes, and (ii) responsible, not merely causally, for various attitudes?

4 The Authority Approach to Agency

My answer draws on the work of Stuart Hampshire, Charles Taylor, Richard Moran, and Matthew Boyle. This is the “Authority Approach” to agency. On this view, an attitude is an exercise of rational agency, *not* insofar as it is formed ‘at will,’ but insofar as it is constituted by consciousness of its own appropriateness. Thus, beliefs and many of our emotions and desires are *active* exercises of agency insofar as they are constituted by the awareness that they are called for, merited, or appropriate responses.

We ordinarily talk and act on the assumption, which we have built into the normal forms of speech, that many of our emotions and attitudes, desires and interests, were formed, and can be altered by our thinking about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their objects.

(Hampshire, 1965: 94; Cf. Taylor, 1985)

These attitudes that are exercises of rational agency are not merely *related to* one's consciousness of the world and what is called for, but they are so related because they are *constituted* by this consciousness. In Hampshire's words, my consciousness that "the object is dangerous, or of its saddening features, *constitutes* my fear of it, or my sadness about it" (Hampshire 1965: 95). Hampshire and Moran often speak as if what constitutes those agential attitudes is a *belief* about the relevant value (e.g., Moran 2001: 54), and even suggest that such a belief is a component of emotions and desires (e.g., Hampshire 1965: 95, 97). But there is no reason to postulate a separate *belief* as either external or internal to rationally agential attitudes. Without either being (affective or conative) beliefs or including beliefs as components, emotions, desires, and acts of aesthetic appreciation can *themselves* be direct modes of experiencing the world and what it merits: they are affective and conative presentations of the world as meriting themselves.⁸

On this view, belief is an exercise of rational agency since to believe is to take the corresponding proposition to-be-believed (that is, true). An action is an exercise of rational agency because to act is to take the action to-be-done (that is, good in some way). Paradigmatic emotions and acts of aesthetic appreciation are exercises of rational agency because to have them is to take their objects as to-be felt or to-be-appreciated in a particular way, a way that is merited by the relevant object's value.

These attitudes could be (dis)avowed and be subject of rational assessment *because* they embody the subject's rational assessment: the subject's take on what is to be believed, felt, desired, or appreciated. If on reflection this take turns out to be mistaken, the subject is under rational pressure to change it. And changing one's take on what to believe, feel, desire, or appreciate is changing the belief, feeling, desire, or appreciation *itself*.

Because exercises of human agency are constituted by this awareness, they are always legitimately vulnerable to a certain "why" question, a question that does not ask what causally or psychologically led one to have the attitude, but *whether* it is appropriate. In contrast to sensations, agential attitudes are sensitive to a question about their normative grounds. While the actuality of sensations is exhausted by how subjects are affected by an object, the actuality of agential attitudes depends on their being taken to be appropriate. This dependence of an attitude on its self-awareness as the proper attitude to have is a central mark of rational agency (cf. Boyle 2010). Thus, this Authority Account of agency can preserve the intuition that agency has something to do with "activity" while denying the misleading idea that it is identical to voluntary control.

This is not to deny that emotions, desires, and acts of aesthetic appreciation seem receptive in a way that actions and even beliefs are not. Surely, we cannot change our emotions, desires, and aesthetic appreciations at will. It is also true that those who acknowledge, say, that their anger or jealousy are unmerited but are unable to change their emotion often, though not always, remain intelligible to others in a way that those who acknowledge that their belief is false but are unable to change it usually are not. There seems to be place for hope that they will feel appropriately in the former case, but not in the latter case. The Authority Approach does not deny this receptivity of emotions, desires, and acts of aesthetic appreciation. What it denies

instead is that this receptivity excludes them from being exercises of rational agency. On the Authority Account, the kind of receptivity that characterizes our emotions, desires, and aesthetic appreciations is compatible with rational agency: feeling, desiring, and aesthetically appreciating are the ways through which we, *human* beings, exercise our rational agency.

This alternative account of agency helps us recognize that we may be aesthetic agents not merely as having other action-producing roles (e.g., creators, editors), but even as aesthetic appreciators. Our aesthetic appreciations are constituted by an awareness of their objects as meriting appreciation, and of themselves as responsive to reasons for appreciation (however inchoately and without articulation at first).⁹ Aesthetic appreciation is a stance on the question: “what is to be appreciated?” just as beliefs are a stance on the question: “what is to be believed?”, actions and intentions are a stance on the question “what is to be done?”, and emotions are a stance on the question: “what is to be felt?” It is for this reason that aesthetic appreciation is an exercise of human rational agency, albeit it differs in form—not only in content—from the theoretical and practical exercises of human agency.

5 Aesthetic Agency: The Authority Approach

That agency is irreducible to intentional action is good news for aesthetics. For actions are intelligible as *aesthetic* actions and make sense as human actions in general only insofar as they are performed on objects and in practices whose values merit appreciation.

But is *aesthetic appreciation* reasons-responsive and active in the way required for rational agency on the Authority Approach? One might argue that even if the Authority Approach is to be preferred to the Practical one, this is insufficient for showing that aesthetic appreciation is an exercise of rational agency. One may worry that aesthetic appreciation is not in the space of reasons.

But this is mistaken. Acts of aesthetic appreciation are capable of reasons-responsiveness and are thus exercises of rational agency insofar as they are (a) assessable as either supported or unsupported by good reasons, (b) subject to an explanatory/normative ‘why’ question, and (c) criticizable for being irresponsible to reasons.

Like other exercises of rational agency, acts of aesthetic appreciation are standardly assessed as either supported or unsupported by reasons. Should I enjoy *Fleabag*—does it merit appreciative aesthetic enjoyment? Doesn’t Bela Bartok’s Concerto for Orchestra merit appreciation no matter how unenjoyable I find it?

Arguably, we criticize acts of aesthetic appreciation for lacking reasons as often as we criticize unjustified actions and beliefs. Relatedly, the ‘why’ question that asks for an (inseparable) explanation of *both*—what led one to appreciate the object *and* what renders this appreciation appropriate—is one of the commonest responses to the expression of aesthetic appreciations. Hearing that a friend dislikes the new Spike Lee, or that another friend marvels at Rachel Cusk’s latest novel *Second Place*, we standardly ask for reasons: Why do you appreciate this work but dislike this one?

We also form reactive attitudes toward our (dis)appreciating interlocutors: we’re disappointed by a good friend who dislikes a poet we love, or admire a critic who constantly helps us appreciate excellent works.

And notice the difference between, on the one hand, appreciation and, on the other hand, sensation. When hearing the expression of appreciation, we standardly ask the same kind of ‘why’ question that we ask in response to avowals of the agential attitudes mentioned above, but not in response to an avowal of sensation; we ask about the normative reasons for them. This is never true of sensations, which are opaque rather than transparent to the world and to whether

the world is such as to give reasons for a certain response. It makes no sense to ask a person why she feels a headache, where this why question concerns the *normative* grounds of the sensation, *whether* to feel it. Even though they are not producible at will, acts of appreciation are reasons-responsive and active: unlike sensations, appreciations are beholden to considerations about whether and what to appreciate, and about their appropriateness. They are not episodes we undergo, but expressions of our reasons-responsive capacity.

Acts of appreciation are thus *required* to be well-supported by reasons, and so they are surely capable of reasons responsiveness—should implies can. When the explanation fails to show them to be appropriate, we criticize the subject, expect her to acknowledge the reasons against her appreciation, and to reconsider *what to appreciate*. If this is what is required in order for an attitude to be an exercise of rational agency, as I argued above, then aesthetic appreciation is an exercise of rational agency.

Conclusion

I've argued that genuine *aesthetic* agency must be agency exercised in the very appreciation of objects. The Practical Approach to Agency that reduces agency to willing forecloses the possibility of such appreciative aesthetic agency. Luckily, we need not endorse the Practical Approach. There are very good reasons to reject it and replace it by the Authority Approach. On this latter approach, an attitude is an exercise of rational agency insofar as it is constituted by an awareness of what is called for or appropriate or merited. And so, not only actions, but also beliefs, emotions, desires, and acts of aesthetic appreciation are exercises of rational agency. This allows us to carve out space for a genuinely Aesthetic rather than Practical Approach to aesthetic agency.

Related topics

Agency and emotions; Rational agency; Agency and responsibility; Agency and games; Agency and normativity.

Further reading

Boyle, Matthew 2009. Active belief. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 (S1): 119–147.

Argues that even though we cannot believe “at will,” our beliefs are exercises of rational agency insofar as they are constituted by making up our minds about what to believe.

Hampshire, Stuart 1965. *Freedom of the Individual*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Argues that there are two kinds of self-knowledge: knowing one’s mental states by observing them and knowing one’s mental states by making up one’s mind about their appropriateness, and locates the freedom of the individual in the latter. We often come to know our beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions by asking the normative question concerning their appropriateness since these mental states are constituted by evaluating them to be appropriate to their objects.

Lopes, Dominic McIver 2018. *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Argues that aesthetic value plays an important role in the good life. It is a value insofar as it provides agents with practical reasons to act in ways that would ideally amount to achievements in the relevant practices.

Nguyen, C. Thi 2020. *Games: Agency as Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Argues that games belong to a distinctive medium of art, the art form of agency, insofar as they offer players aesthetically (and practically) valuable experiences of adopting variety of different agencies, and of engaging in different motivational structures.

Smith, Angela 2005. Responsibility for attitudes: Activity and passivity in mental life. *Ethics* 115 (2): 236–271.

Argues that we are (morally) responsible for our attitudes not insofar as they are under our voluntary control, but insofar as they reflect our evaluative judgments.

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<<http://www.amherstlecture.org/wolf2016/>>.
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¹ E.g., “In very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and ‘agency’ denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity” (Markus Schlosser, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019).

² Although Wolf does not explicitly consider the view I defend below that we exercise agency in aesthetic appreciation, one of her passages acknowledges the importance of regarding our very susceptibility to beauty as part of our responsible agency: “But if moral responsibility is not a part of some larger or more general feature of human agency, it will not be or relevant to our capacity for humor or creativity or to our susceptibility to nature or to beauty” (2015: 141).

³ Reasons for acting not on behalf of, but regardless of, an object’s aesthetic value need not depend on appreciation.

⁴ Such lack of appreciation also falls short of the mark of success in response to criticism, see Gorodeisky (2021b).

⁵ Cf. Hampshire (1965), Moran (2001).

⁶ Cf. Taylor (1985), Wolf (2016), Smith (2005).

⁷ Cf. Moran (2001).

⁸ On desires as presentations of goodness, see Brewer (2009), Tenenbaum (2007), Boyle and Lavin (2010). On the emotions as presentations of value (independently of having a belief as a component), see McDowell (1998), Milona (2016), Tappolet (2016), and Gorodeisky (2021a).

⁹ The claim is *not* that every act of aesthetic appreciation is responsive to reasons. I might appreciate a shade of violet color for no other reason than its particular color, which *as such* merits appreciation. This in no way undermines the rationality of aesthetic appreciation just as the fact that some actions are performed for no reason does not undermine the rationality of action. In both cases, the relevant rationality is *not* a matter of a positive answer to the rational question “why” but of the *applicability* of this question (cf. Anscombe 2000: 25). Moreover, even though I appreciate this shade of violet for no other reason than this very color, my appreciation is constituted by my sensitivity to this shade of color as meriting appreciation.