

ON LIKING AESTHETIC VALUE

Keren Gorodeisky

Auburn University

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ABSTRACT: According to tradition, aesthetic value is non-contingently connected to a certain feeling of liking or pleasure. Is that true? Two answers are on offer in the field of aesthetics today: 1. The *Hedonist* answers: Yes, aesthetic value is non-contingently connected to pleasure insofar as this value is constituted and explained by the power of its possessors to please (under standard conditions). 2. The *Non-Affectivist* answers: No. At best, pleasure is contingently related to aesthetic value. The aim of this paper is to point to a blind spot in the dialectic between these two standard positions by defending a third neglected answer to the question above, the answer of the *Value-Meriting-Pleasure* [VMP] advocate. According to this answer, a certain kind of (cognitive and responsive) pleasure is connected to aesthetic value non-contingently, but also non-hedonically. VMP is the view that objects of aesthetic value are non-contingently related to pleasure insofar as they *merit* a certain kind of pleasure. But, *pace* the hedonist, those objects are *valuable* (those that are to be engaged with etc.) *neither* on account of their capacity to give pleasure *nor* on account of the hedonic value of the attitude they merit.

We often describe our responses to films, novels, songs, landscapes and other aesthetically valuable objects in affective terms: we “hate” or “love” them, “admire,” “enjoy” or “detest” them, or find that they “leave us cold.” Most often, we communicate our aesthetic responses in terms of our *likes* and *dislikes*. Tradition has a succinct explanation of this way of speaking: aesthetic value is essentially connected to feeling, particularly to a certain kind of liking or pleasure. Is that true? Should we endorse a non-contingent connection between aesthetic value and a feeling of liking or pleasure? Call this *The Affective Question*.

Two answers are on offer in the field of aesthetics today:

1. **The Hedonist** answers: Yes, aesthetic value is non-contingently connected to pleasure insofar as this value is constituted and explained by the power of its possessors to give pleasure (under standard conditions). What makes objects aesthetically valuable is their capacity to produce pleasure.

[T]he *aesthetic merit* of a work of art derives from (1) the *aesthetic pleasure* that (2) it is *capable* of giving to a consumer . . . (Mohan Matthen, 2018: 28)

The aesthetic value of an object is the value it possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification. (Beardsley, 1982: 21)¹

2. **The Non-Affectivist** answers: No. At best, pleasure is contingently related to aesthetic value insofar as some of its possessors may *happen* to cause pleasure in certain subjects.

[Pleasure is] a contingent byproduct of aesthetic engagement. (Lopes, ms.: 3)

[T]he connection between appreciation and liking . . . is a contingent matter, specifically a matter of individual psychology. (Carroll, 2016: 6)

The aim of this paper is to point to a blind spot in the dialectic between these two standard positions. Instead of these two answers to the *affective question*, I propose a third neglected answer:

The Value-Meriting-Pleasure [henceforth VMP] advocate answers: Yes, an affective experience of liking, which, for reasons I explain below, I also call pleasure, *is* connected to aesthetic value non-contingently, but also *non-hedonically* (not in the way the hedonist conceives of this connection). On this picture, objects of aesthetic value are non-contingently related to

¹ Cf., Levinson (1996), Matthen (2014), (2017).

pleasure insofar as they *merit* a certain kind of pleasure. But, *pace* the hedonist, those objects are *valuable* (those that are to be engaged with etc.) *neither* on account of their capacity to give pleasure *nor* on account of the hedonic value of the experience they merit.

This already suggests the direction of the non-contingent relation advocated by VMP, which is the same direction endorsed by Socrates against Euthyphro: according to the VMPer, Euthyphro is as confused about aesthetic value as he is about piety. Excellent artworks, graceful movements, majestic castles and many more objects that we correctly marvel at for their aesthetic qualities are not aesthetically valuable because they give pleasure. Rather, they merit our pleasure insofar as they are aesthetically valuable.² In being aesthetically valuable objects, they *merit, deserve* or *call for* a positive affective experience: a feeling of pleasure or liking.³

² This is an entailment claim not an explanatory value-claim: on VMP, O is aesthetically valuable *iff* O merits a certain kind of pleasure, but O is *not* valuable because O merits pleasure.

³ Let me be clear: VMP is *not* the view that the experience of aesthetic value entails pleasure (in some statistically significant group). It is completely possible not to feel pleasure in aesthetically valuable objects (even in cases where we correctly ascribe this value to them). Instead, on VMP the very *possession* of aesthetic value by an object entails the *merit* of pleasure. This commitment groups VMP among so-called Neo-Sentimentalist Theories of Value (or Neo-Sentimentalist Fitting-Attitude Analyses of Value), namely, among those theories that elucidate certain values or evaluative concepts in terms of the affective attitude that they merit. See for example, McDowell (1998a, 1998b), Wiggins (1987), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000a)(2000b), and Tappolet (2016). On the categorization of VMP among these theories, see 1.1.

VMP occupies a neglected space in the dialectic between hedonism and non-affectivism insofar as it retains *both* the grain of truth in hedonism, namely, the hedonist's commitment to a non-contingent relation between aesthetic value and a feeling of pleasure, *and* the grain of truth in its non-affective denial, namely, the denial that what makes aesthetically valuable objects valuable is their power to please. Unlike the non-affectivist, the VMP advocate answers the question "what *marks* aesthetically valuable things as *aesthetically* valuable?" by appeal to pleasure. But unlike the hedonist, she rejects an answer to the question, "what *makes* aesthetic valuable things *valuable*?" that appeals to pleasure. On VMP, aesthetically valuable objects are *neither* valuable *on account* of their tendency to cause pleasure (under suitable conditions), *nor* on account of the hedonic value of the pleasurable response they merit. Yet, *that* they are *aesthetically* (rather than, say, epistemically, pragmatically, financially or otherwise) valuable means that they merit aesthetic pleasure.

The main task of the paper is not to argue conclusively for this neglected alternative, but to put it on the table as an attractive account of aesthetic value. In section 1, I introduce some preliminaries. In section 2, I present the view. In section 3, I present a few observations in favor of it, but none of these is meant as a conclusive argument for VMP. In the rest of the paper, I motivate VMP against (1) aesthetic hedonism (section 4), and (2) two varieties of non-affectivism about aesthetic value: (a) the doxastic account that explains aesthetic value in terms of belief (5.1), and (b) the practical account that explains aesthetic value in terms of action (5.2). I end the paper, in section 6, by gesturing towards my favored direction for answering the normative question about the ground of aesthetic value.

1. Some Preliminaries

1.1 VMP and Fitting Attitude Analyses

Before moving any further, I wish to clarify the core commitment of VMP by situating the view, not only within aesthetics, but also within the wider literature on value given its noticeable affinities with a certain tradition in meta-ethics. The normative term “merit” that I introduced above in order to characterize the relation between aesthetic value and pleasure is closely related to the normative terms “fittingness” and “appropriateness” that are at the center of a vibrant normative tradition starting, arguably, with Frantz Brentano (1969). The core commitment of this tradition is to the characterization of values in terms of the affective experiences that they do not just elicit or tend to elicit, but those that they merit or render appropriate. The VMP advocate agrees with this heart of the tradition when applied to aesthetic value. She uses the terms “merit,” “fittingness,” and “appropriateness” similarly to the way in which they are (minimally) used by advocates of this tradition to claim that the particular kind of value at stake in this paper— aesthetic value—is best characterized in terms of the affective experience that is appropriate to it. For her, the facts that bear on whether an object is aesthetically valuable render a certain kind of (cognitive) affective experience, which I call “aesthetic pleasure” and define below, “fitting” or “appropriate.” VMP, then, is a Neo-Sentimentalist kind of “Fitting Attitude Analysis of Value” [FAA],⁴ insofar as it elucidates *a* certain kind of value in terms of the affective/sentimental

⁴ E.g., Brentano (1969), Scheller (1973), McDowell (1998a 1998b), Wiggins (1987), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000a)(2000b), and Tappolet (2016). VMP may nonetheless differ from (at least most extant) FAA in (1) its (narrow) ambition to explain only *one* kind of value in terms of its fitting attitude, and in (2) its primitivist proposal about the source of aesthetic value, as that

attitude that is appropriate to it,⁵ where this “particular species of the appropriateness of response [is the one] relevant to property ascription—to whether some X is Φ ” (D’Arms and Jacobson, 2000(a):731).

However, as will become clear in the following, the VMP picture developed in this paper goes beyond this minimal claim that is shared by all FAA. It involves a particular development of this claim, one that advocates, for example, not only the normative independence of aesthetic value from its power to elicit pleasure (*pace* the aesthetic hedonist), but also the metaphysical

which is valuable independently of its effects on human beings (see section 6). *If* FAA are defined by the claim that sentimentally valuable objects are *valuable on account of* the value of their sentimental effects on human beings, then VMP is not a FAA.

⁵ The way I use the term ‘attitude’ in this paper to refer to aesthetic pleasure as the attitude that aesthetic value merits is in line with the way that this same term is used in the normative literature to refer to “fitting attitudes,” and, more generally, to emotional experiences of value. This way of using the term is slightly different from the way it is used in the literature on perception to denote *one element* of an experience, the one that is distinguished both from the ‘content’ of the experience, and from the experience as a whole. Since I do not mean to distinguish between the ‘attitude’ and the affective experience that I call aesthetic pleasure in this latter way, I also use the term ‘attitude’ interchangeably with the terms ‘feeling’ and ‘affective experience.’ Moreover, referring to it as an ‘attitude’ is not meant to suggest that aesthetic pleasure is propositional. Rather, the term serves to stress that aesthetic pleasure is the fitting or appropriate *stance* towards, or *experience of*, aesthetic value.

independence of aesthetic value from the pleasure that it merits.⁶ These commitments do not undermine the affinities between VMP and FAA, but they highlight the particular way in which the proposed VMP develops the core fittingness claim shared by all FAA.⁷

Since highlighting how VMP is both continuous with, and divergent from, the sentimental tradition of FAA may prove helpful and clarificatory, I will continue to situate the proposal within this tradition wherever relevant in the rest of the paper. But given how thorny and technical the term “fitting attitude” has become,⁸ and given that I can say most everything I

⁶ In this respect, VMP continues the path in the tradition of FAA that is advocated by such as Scheller (1973), arguably Wiggins (1987), Oddie (2005) (though with regard to the conative attitude of desire) and Tappolet (2016).

⁷ In spite of these affinities between VMP and FAA, the view has to be *put on the table* (as I claimed above) for the following reasons: first, though a number of FAA theorists *mention* aesthetic value, they do nothing more than *mention* it. As far as I know, there is no developed FAA of aesthetic value other than the one I propose in this paper. Second, the FAA theorists that do mention aesthetic value do not mention *aesthetic pleasure* as its fitting attitude, let alone characterize this pleasure in the way I do. Finally, given that the particular meriting relation between aesthetic value and pleasure that I advocate in this paper is not seriously considered as a live option in contemporary discussions concerning this value and this pleasure, to introduce, develop and motivate VMP, as I do in this paper, is to “put it on the table” as an attractive account of aesthetic value.

⁸ E.g., Howard (2018).

say about the relation between the value and the affective attitude at stake in this paper in different terms, I aim to minimize the “fittingness” talk.

1.2 Aesthetic?

Some concepts come with a weighty baggage. They are loaded, located at the center of heated debates. “Aesthetic value” is an honor member of this group, and so a few preparatory remarks are called for before we can get to any substance.

Though the circle of its critics is growing each day,⁹ for many years now, the leading picture (indeed, the myth) of what the ‘aesthetic’ is has been, and still is, the following one: the ‘aesthetic,’ on this picture, modifies properties, values and experiences that are *merely sensory*, those that are, or are perceived by, experiences and feelings which are much like headaches—merely passive, non-cognitive, and not fully rational experiences. Aesthetic experiences are kinds “of sensuous thrill[s] that beauty . . . causes in us without benefit of argument or analysis” (Danto, 2003, p. 93). As Danto suggests in this passage, on this picture, ‘aesthetic’ experiences are not merely sensory, but also independent of, and opposed to, exercises of the intellect; they just sweep us, independently of understanding and analyzing their objects. But, since art does require understanding, background knowledge, familiarity with a genre and context, immersion in the artworld, and, according to the Dantoesque line, much “argument or analysis,” the ‘aesthetic’ is standardly regarded as irrelevant to art. In fact, most art as we know it since the 1960’s has nothing to do with anything aesthetic. Or so goes the anti-aesthetic move that typically accompanies this picture of the ‘aesthetic.’ While this is not the place to argue against

⁹ E.g., Shelley (2003), (2009), Lopes (2018).

this picture, I will only note that I use the term ‘aesthetic’ differently, more broadly (though nonetheless in sync with the tradition of thinking about the ‘aesthetic’ from the 18th century):

- (1) When serving to modify experiences, the ‘aesthetic’ in this paper modifies a broader experiential category than that of the ‘merely sensory.’ Correspondingly, it refers to properties that may not be apprehended by any one of the five senses, but could nonetheless be apprehended by non-inferential (perceptual, imaginative and affective) experiences. These properties may include ‘daring,’ ‘witty’ and ‘shocking,’ the properties that Danto ascribed to Duchamp’s conceptual work, *Fountain*, just as much as they may include ‘profundity,’ ‘depth,’ ‘insight,’ and ‘illumination.’¹⁰ Even though the latter are not experienced by any of the five senses, they have been regarded as *aesthetic* properties of literary works ever since philosophers started to use the term ‘aesthetic’ in the 18th century. This gives us reason to avoid restricting the ‘aesthetic’ to the merely sensory, and licenses us to speak of (at least some) conceptual artworks as aesthetic.
- (2) The ‘aesthetic’ in this paper is not opposed to reasoning, understanding, and other exercises of the intellect, but encompasses them. This use is also continuous with a very long tradition of emphasizing that *aesthetic experience, perception and feeling* necessarily involve the intellectual capacities of the understanding, reason and thought. As Hume put it, “the beauties or blemishes [of the work of a genius] cannot

¹⁰ Danto (1981), Shelley (2003, 2009).

be *perceived* by him, whose *thought* is not capacious enough” (Hume, 1985, XXIII; italics added).¹¹

- (3) When it comes to artworks, I will use the term ‘aesthetic value,’ like some before me, to refer broadly to “the value of an object *qua* work of art” (Gaut, 1998: 183). Thus, artworks (and other objects) may be aesthetically valuable not only on account of the properties that have been typically regarded as ‘aesthetic value properties’ (e.g., ‘beautiful,’ ‘graceful,’ ‘elegant,’ ‘garish’), but also on account of properties like ‘daring,’ ‘shocking,’ ‘profundity,’ and ‘insightfulness,’ and even on account of their ‘disturbing power’ and ‘boringness.’
- (4) And I will also assume that fine art and natural objects are not the only objects of aesthetic value. Other artifacts and objects may be aesthetically valuable.¹²

Time to turn to some substance.

2. Value Meriting Pleasure

In this section, I present the core commitments of VMP.

¹¹ Cf. Kant, who held that, *aesthetic* pleasure is “reflective” and “*a priori*” (2000, p. 221). For him, “a representation of truth, suitability, *beauty* or justice *could never enter our thought if we could not elevate ourselves above the senses to higher cognitive faculties*” (2000, p. 173; italics added). Cf. Shelley (2003).

¹² Cf. Lopes (2018: 7).

2.1 The relation between aesthetic value and pleasure

What is the non-contingent relation between aesthetic value and the affective attitude I call aesthetic pleasure that VMP is committed to?

First, pleasure is non-contingently connected to aesthetic value insofar as it is part of the concept ‘aesthetic value,’¹³ such that predicating this concept is ascribing a value property that merits aesthetic pleasure (*whether* one feels the pleasure or not).

This non-contingent connection, then, is a *meriting* rather than a dispositional or a grounding relation. What is common to all aesthetically valuable objects—by their nature as *aesthetically* valuable—is that they *merit, deserve* or *call for* a specific kind pleasure (to be explained below) in much the same way that persons merit and call for respect, pitiful people merit or call for a feeling of pity and morally outrageous events merit or call for a feeling of moral outrage. Aesthetic value calls for and normatively supports a certain kind of pleasure just as these other values and disvalues call for and normatively support certain other affective experiences. To this extent, VMP is an FAA of aesthetic value.

Notice that these axiological terms (of merit and desert) imply a distinction between feeling and endorsing: to judge an object to be aesthetically valuable is not necessarily to feel pleasure, but to endorse a certain kind of pleasure as merited, called for, or appropriate.

For this reason, the relevant meriting relation is not to be identified with a dispositional relation. VMP is not the view that aesthetic value *is* to be experienced with pleasure under

¹³ Even though I sometime speak in terms of the concept, the aim is not just to get clear on the concept, but on the nature of this peculiar kind of value and of the objects that are so valuable. What matters are those objects and their value.

standard conditions. It may or it may not. Often, we fail to be responsive to what this value merits and calls for, even if we correctly and justifiably believe that the object in question merits pleasure. The relevant failure is a failure of *responsiveness* analogous to the failure to respect a person as she merits: even if one judges that an object is valuable in the way that it is, one may fail to feel the pleasure that the object nonetheless merits, just as one may fail to respect a person even if one judges that the person merits respect. Therefore, the claim that we don't always enjoy or like objects that we judge to be aesthetically great is *no* objection against VMP.¹⁴ I do not deny “that there is no contradiction, for example, in asserting that a certain work of art is good, but not to one's liking” (Carroll, 2016: 6). VMP allows for different forms of non-affective responses to and evaluations of aesthetically valuable objects.¹⁵ Still, whether we feel this pleasure or not, aesthetic value *merits* the pleasure that I will define below. Unlike dispositionalism, on VMP, even in normal conditions, human beings may not feel this pleasure. But VMP shares with dispositionalism the claim that aesthetic value must be *characterized* in terms of a certain kind of experience.

Next consider another, popular, non-contingent relation between aesthetic value and pleasure—the hedonic relation. The non-contingent relation between aesthetic value and pleasure that VMP advocates should not be identified with a value-grounding, hedonic relation. The hedonist claims that pleasure (or the capacity to please) is the ground of this value in the sense of

¹⁴ And so VMP embraces what is often regarded as a “critical gap” between judgments and emotional responses (e.g., D'Arms and Jacobson 2006), which I prefer calling the critical gap between believing and feeling or between correctly attributing value and valuing.

¹⁵ See Gorodeisky (2019).

being that which makes its possessors *valuable*. But the VMPer takes such an aesthetico-Euthyphro to be confused. What makes, say, Sakai Hoitsu's *Autumn Plants and Quails* beautiful and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* brilliant is not their power to please or the value of the pleasantness of the experience that they tend to cause. Nevertheless, it is precisely their *aesthetic* excellence that is *worthy* of pleasure. The VMPer rejects the hedonist's claim that we should value certain things because of their power to please. On VMP, it is *not* the power to please that normatively supports our aesthetically valuing objects, but their being *aesthetically* valuable that normatively supports our aesthetic enjoyment of them.

Compare this with Aristotle's virtuous actions: their capacity to produce pleasure (in virtuous people) is *not* what makes these actions good, ethically speaking, but rather it is their being good that is worthy of pleasure. Similarly, on VMP, their power to please is not what makes aesthetically valuable objects good, aesthetically speaking, but rather it is their being good that it is worthy of pleasure.

Moreover, metaphysically, VMP is committed to a claim that at least one contemporary aesthetic hedonist rejects, the claim that "a mind-independent quality" is such as to merit "an attitude of affective appraisal" (Matthen, 2018: 22). On VMP, aesthetic value is *metaphysically* mind-independent in the following sense: the specific aesthetic value of any specific aesthetically valuable object is *not* a feeling or a projection of a subject's feeling, but a value property that resides in this object by supervening on (or being realized by) a particular combination of this object's mind-independent properties. Specific instantiations of aesthetic value supervene on properties such as a particular shade of color, allusions, fine acting, pace, rhythm, expressiveness, characters, shape of sentences, symbolism, drama, wit, and so on and so forth. It is a value that objects have in virtue of having mind-independent aesthetic and non-

aesthetic, physical and non-physical (but rather cognitive, historical etc.) properties such as the ones just mentioned.

This list of properties that realize instantiations of aesthetic value is in principle open-ended. Qualities like ‘boring’ or ‘inelegant’ may realize an instantiation of aesthetic value as long as they are such as to enhance the overall value of the object. VMP thus provides only a thin constraint on the content of aesthetic value: aesthetic value is such as to merit the kind of pleasure I define below, but the properties that realize instantiations of this value—the properties that we refer to in order to explain why an object instantiates this value and thus merits pleasure—may differ greatly.

Given the great variety of such value-making properties of different objects and artworks—a variety that has traditionally been correlated with theses about the non-inferential nature of aesthetic judgment and its complicated relation to general principles¹⁶—I take VMP’s paper-thin constraint on content to be a virtue of the view.¹⁷ The most we can say about the content of this value other than its being that which merits aesthetic pleasure is that often, but not always, the properties on which instantiations of this value supervene are *holistically* related to each other and to the object as a whole, such that they are value-making properties not monadically, but by virtue of their relation to each other and to the object as a whole. This, though, is true of many instantiations of this value, but not of all (not, for example, of a beautiful

¹⁶ E.g., Sibley (1959), Mothersill (1984).

¹⁷ Cf. Jacobson (2011) on the attractiveness of characterizing a value like aesthetic value in terms of its fitting attitude given the difficulty of finding any one set of (natural) properties on which it supervenes.

but simple shade of purple). And it is not distinctive of these instantiations. Other, non-aesthetically valuable objects (notably, organisms) may have analogous holistic unities. So, such a holistic character is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition on aesthetically valuable objects, but it is prevalent.

If VMP is in any sense a response-dependent theory, then, it is so “semantically” or “conceptually” insofar as it holds that aesthetic value cannot be *characterized* independently of the human capacity to feel.¹⁸

Finally, the meriting connection is unconditional but defeasible in the following way: the facts that bear on aesthetic value serve as unconditional, but also defeasible, and not all-things-considered normative support of aesthetic pleasure. This means that, while the normative support for feeling aesthetic pleasure in aesthetically valuable objects is unconditional, it might be defeated by pragmatic, moral, political and social considerations, or outweighed by what might be called “sensitivity” or “personal” considerations (those that are grounded in our particular sensibilities and life-styles).¹⁹ Such considerations might normatively support not liking an aesthetically valuable object in specific circumstances.

¹⁸ Cf. D’Arms and Jacobson, 2006: 190, Tappolet, 2016: 116-21.

¹⁹ I am not committed to the claim that all these belong to the same type of considerations. It may well be that only the moral among these considerations defeat the normative support for aesthetic pleasure by providing normative support against feeling it. The other considerations seem not to speak directly against feeling it, but against putting oneself in the position of feeling it (they concern the conditions for feeling it rather than directly the feeling).

Suppose that *The Triumph of the Will*, *The Tale of Genji* and *The Velvet Underground & Nico* are aesthetically valuable. Then *The Triumph of the Will* merits everyone aesthetic pleasure, even if there are moral considerations against feeling this pleasure, moral considerations that constitute reasons against feeling it.²⁰ Similarly, aesthetically enjoying *The Tale of Genji* is unconditionally merited, even if no one can fully enjoy the novel without knowing the language in which it was written—the language of the high courts in Japan’s Heian period (c. 11 century AD), a language that, according to historians, were unreadable as early as a century after it was written—and even if most of us have pragmatic and personal reasons not to spend the time required for learning this language and to familiarize ourselves with the culture of high courtiers in Heian Japan. Finally, the Velvet Underground’s album *The Velvet Underground & Nico* merits everyone’s aesthetic pleasure, even if some of us have pragmatic and personal reasons—reasons that are grounded in our personal styles and sensibilities—not to spend the time, effort, and plausibly pain that it may take for us to cultivate the kind of ear, the kind of sensibility that is required in order to be in the position to enjoy the album. That is, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* merits aesthetic pleasure even from those of us who were raised by classical enthusiastic parents, who have not allowed any music that was created past the 1900’s to be played at home,

²⁰ This is *not* to embrace autonomism, the view that moral value has no bearing on aesthetic value. Rather, the claim is that in cases where a moral defect in a work does not undermine its overall aesthetic value (as is plausibly the case of *Triumph of the Will*), and in cases where a moral defect *related* to a work is not integral to its aesthetic character (as perhaps are the moral flaws of Bill Cosby), the normative support for aesthetic pleasure may be defeated by the moral considerations against enjoying the *Triumph of the Will* and the *Cosby Show*.

sent us to classical music lessons and appreciation classes, and made us such classicists ourselves that hearing any note of late 60's rock makes us shriek with pain.

The point is this: it is highly plausible that many of us have good pragmatic reasons not to invest the time and effort that it takes to acquire the necessary background (and/or personal reasons not to cultivate the sensibility) required in order to so much as be in the position to enjoy or like many objects of aesthetic value. But this does not undermine the core claim of VMP, the claim that aesthetically valuable objects merit aesthetic pleasure unconditionally: they unconditionally but defeasibly support aesthetic enjoyment.²¹

²¹ Throughout the paper I use the phrase “aesthetic objects merit and thus normatively support aesthetic pleasure” rather than “provide reasons to feel this pleasure” mainly because of (1) worries that affective attitudes cannot be based on reasons, and (2) issues stemming from the notorious “Wrong Kind of Reasons” Problem [WKR]. Briefly, (1) MaGuire (2018) claims that, given that reasons are facts necessarily capable of conflicting with each other and of being combined together to explain further normative facts, while the facts that normatively support affective attitudes are not, there could be no *reasons* for affective attitudes. While I believe that his argument is unsound, here I will only note that nothing I say depends on there being *reasons* for feeling aesthetic pleasure. I am committed only to this pleasure being normatively supported by aesthetically valuable objects. Since MaGuire believes in the existence of normative facts that show affective attitudes to be either fitting or unfitting (and only resist calling them ‘reasons’), even if his argument were sound, it would have no implications for mine. (2) The task of explaining how VMP avoids the WKR problem must remain for another paper, but here I can emphasize that in this paper I do *not* explain aesthetic value in terms of reasons but in terms

2.2 The affective attitude merited by aesthetic value, or “aesthetic pleasure”²²

I call the affective attitude that aesthetically valuable objects merit “aesthetic pleasure” [AP], and characterize it by sketching its eight structural characteristics. The sketch presupposes that a formal, structural or functional approach to pleasure as such is superior to phenomenological approaches (also known as hedonic tone approaches).²³ In other words, I assume that what is common to all pleasures cannot be captured by a uniform kind of affective phenomenology. Rather, pleasure as such has to be characterized in terms of its form or structure and in terms of the way that it shapes, modifies or affects pleasurable activities or experiences. Similarly, I characterize AP neither in terms of its phenomenological feel nor in terms of its particular objects and contents but in terms of its structure, and the functional role it plays in modifying certain experiences.

of merit and worthiness (or fittingness), where this is understood both as a particular species of correctness *and* as *responsiveness* owed to a specific value (at one and the same time). Given that, my preferred response to the WKR problem consists of an explanation of this particular species of correctness and responsiveness, and the way in which they serve as internal standards of aesthetic pleasure . For a drop in the ocean of the literature on the WKR problem, see, D’Arms and Jacobson (2000b), Rabinowicz & Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), Hieronymi (2005), and Gertken & Kiesewetter (2017).

²² 2.2 and section 3 largely overlap with two sections of Gorodeisky (2019).

²³ Cf. Strohl (2012) and Aydede (2018).

Note that the following eight characteristics are introduced in order of generality: from the most general characteristics of pleasure as such, to the most specific characteristics of *aesthetic* pleasure. We start by what seems to be true of all pleasures, and gradually zoom in to get a close-up on aesthetic pleasure.

(1) *Affective*: AP is an affective attitude, which, as such, has *an* affective phenomenology. But this phenomenology neither unifies it with all kinds of pleasure (such that it is felt every time we feel pleasure), nor unifies all instances of aesthetic pleasure: different instances of this pleasure may feel very differently.

Moreover, AP is not experienced as a separate occurrent state, but rather as a positively affective way of engaging with an object (e.g., by perceiving, attending to, imagining or evaluating it).

(2) *Self-maintenance*: why call the affective attitude that is merited aesthetic value a *pleasure*? Primarily because it is characterized by a positive affective valence that is manifested by the future-directedness that is a mark of all pleasures simply *qua* pleasures. *Qua* pleasure, the pleasure in aesthetically valuable objects, like the pleasures in food, sex, conversation, learning and others, is self-maintaining. It tends towards its own continuation such that one typically wishes to, and tends to, retain the same pleasurable experience.²⁴

²⁴ Cf. Kant: “we linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself” (2000: 107). Sizer (2013, p. 220) presents empirical research in support of the view that this is a characteristic of pleasure as such.

The combination of these two first characteristics entitles us to call this attitude a “pleasure,” not simply “liking” or an affective kind of appreciation.

(3) *Holistic Complexity*: Ordinarily (but not always), we enjoy an aesthetically valuable object in light of enjoying something or other about it:²⁵ I enjoy Colm Toibin’s *House of Names* in light of enjoying the vivid and detailed imagining of the first-person perspectives of Clytemnestra, Electra and Orestes, its psychological depth and power, the charged emotional tension between the characters, the transparent and succinct language, and the way these all complement and reinforce each other. I like Paul McCobb’s bench because I like the angle of the legs, the color of the drawer, the shape of the knob, its simplicity, and the way these fit together. We typically enjoy an excellent work, an aesthetically valuable artifact or a natural object as a whole in light of enjoying something about it, be it, its gracefulness, fine acting or even disturbing and painful power, when this disturbing or painful power fits the other features of the object so as to contribute to its overall aesthetic excellence.²⁶

This holistic complexity of AP is crucial for properly understanding how even what is regarded as “painful art” merits AP. Works such as Michael Haneke’s films, Thomas Hardy’s

²⁵ This is *not* a necessary condition of AP: we may correctly feel AP in the beauty of a simple shade of color, or the elegance of a simple curve in virtue of nothing other than their simple and analyzable beauty and elegance. This holistic complexity of the pleasure corresponds to the holistic complexity of most, but not all, aesthetically valuable objects mentioned above. In neither case is it a necessary or sufficient condition.

²⁶ See Strohl for other structurally analogous pleasures that involve pain (2012: 210).

novels, Lauren Groff's short stories and many classical tragedies, to mention only a few are disturbing; experiencing them is often painful. But this is no reason to deny that they merit AP. On VMP, works such as these are worthy of AP in part because experiencing them is disturbing. The claim is not that we do always feel pleasure in great but painful art under standard conditions, but rather that painful art may *merit* aesthetic pleasure no less than non-painful art. Painful art is no reason to deny that aesthetically excellent works merit pleasure.

(4) *Revealing value*: the pleasure at the heart of VMP is a cognitive kind of affective experience (analogous in some respects to non-affective perception) insofar as it purports to reveal the value of its object,²⁷ and, when correct, it indeed presents the object as having the value it has.²⁸ In successful cases, we apprehend the value of the object *in and through* feeling pleasure in it.²⁹ In these cases, we enjoy the object *as* aesthetically valuable in the way that it is,

²⁷ Though I will not argue for it here, I also believe that, in typical cases, AP presents itself as appropriate or merited. Cf. Skorupski (1999: 445) and Goldie (2004: 253) on the emotions as typically presenting themselves as “justified” by their objects.

²⁸ Recent empirical science lends support to this cognitive nature of the pleasure in art, e.g., Christenson, 2017, section 7.

²⁹ Other than in the context of interpreting historical figures (e.g., Shapiro 2018), *very* little philosophical work has been done on the cognitive character of pleasure (aesthetic or otherwise). Nevertheless, in the literature on the emotions, there is a wide consensus about the cognitive and (re)presentational nature of affective experiences (e.g., McDowell (1998a, 1998b), Goldie (2000), Johnston (2001), D’Arms and Jacobson (2000b), Milona (2016), Tappolet (2016)). For a

without necessarily *first* believing that it is aesthetically valuable in the way that it is or first non-affectively perceiving it to be so. We may, immediately, grasp the object's value *by* enjoying it.³⁰

Note that aesthetic pleasure makes the object's value available to the feeling subject by modifying experiences such as perceiving, imagining, and attending. Aydede (2018) is right that thinking of pleasure as modifying other experiences should not be more mysterious than thinking that being fast or slow modifies an activity like dancing. I'd like to add that it should similarly not be mysterious that different ways of engaging with objects (e.g., pleasantly or not) do not only allow us to experience them differently, but also, by so doing, to discover new features of them, for example, their aesthetic value.

(5) *Rational assessment*: AP is always subject to a rational question "why," such that if the object is shown not to merit AP, the feeling subject is under rational pressure to re-experience the object, and be open to, indeed try to, revise her affective attitude, that is, try and align her feelings to what the object indeed merits.³¹

welcome recent exception that stresses the representational nature of the affective experiences of *aesthetic* properties, see Goffin 2018. Our proposals still significantly differ (e.g., concerning the nature and structure of the relevant affective experiences, the value of a sentimentalist approach in aesthetics, aesthetic reasons).

³⁰ Cf. "Affective experiences alone [independently of perceptual experiences] can represent aesthetic properties" (Goffin, 2018: 11). For a fuller defense of the cognitive power of pleasure, see my (forthcoming).

³¹ For an elaboration and defense, see Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018), Gorodeisky (2018).

(6) *Universal*: aesthetically valuable objects merit everyone's pleasure, even if, as I explained above, the normative support for universally feeling pleasure may be, and often are, defeated by other (e.g., pragmatic, moral, personal) considerations.³²

(7) *Self-contained*: AP is self-contained such that it is taken in an object independently of its suitability for any further end. Aesthetically valuable objects merit pleasure merely by virtue of being aesthetically valuable, not by virtue of their contribution to any further end.

³² I believe that this defeasibility undermines possible worries about the universal scope of AP, particularly, worries that aesthetic value cannot merit pleasure from *everyone* because of the deep cultural differences among us (Matthen 2018), and because of our meaningfully different personalities, which, as meaningful, should remain different and distinct (Nehamas 2007). Briefly, I respond that, even though aesthetically valuable objects merit everyone's AP, different people may have practical, pragmatic and personal reasons not to put themselves in the position to enjoy these objects (e.g., since it would take too much time and effort). And so people may be justified in not enjoying a great variety of aesthetically valuable objects. In other words, universal merit is fully compatible with (1) cultural and personal diversity (of people and artifacts), (2) the greater and lesser difficulty that different people often face in trying to enjoy the same aesthetically valuable objects, and (3) the fact that not enjoying certain aesthetically valuable objects is often justified.

(8) *Background*: for the most part (but not always), to feel this pleasure, one has to have certain minimal background experiences, such as familiarity with related objects, and practice in looking, listening, attending and related ways of experiencing objects.³³

Recall that these characteristics were introduced according to their generality. While the first two of these structural features seem to characterize all pleasures, and the first three characterize most pleasures, universalization may characterize only very few pleasures, being self-contained seems to characterize mainly aesthetic pleasure (but *perhaps* also, depending on your moral outlook etc., certain pleasures in virtuous people and virtuous actions), and the last feature may characterize only aesthetic pleasure.³⁴

³³ These same characteristics shape aesthetic displeasure: aesthetic demerit normatively supports a feeling of displeasure that is a complex feeling (with *an* affective phenomenology) that tends toward its discontinuation. This displeasure reveals the object, it is rationally assessable, it is not private but universal, it does not depend on the failure of the object to fulfill any additional ends, and it typically requires certain background experiences and familiarity.

³⁴ The main differences between moral pleasures and AP (beyond whether or not the former are self-contained) concern (1) the fact the moral pleasures are taken in the fittingness of an action or a character to a particular requirement, principle, rule or law, while the pleasure in aesthetically valuable objects is independent of any such fittingness and (2) the different backgrounds required in order to be in the position to feel moral pleasures and AP respectively.

2.3 No-Priority

FAA that characterize the relevant affective attitude as cognitive or perceptual (e.g., McDowell (1998b), Wiggins (1987)) are often accused of circularity. I too offer a kind of FAA on which AP is cognitive and analogous to perception. Yet, my account is not circular in the relevant sense insofar as it describes the attitude by appeal to eight *structural* characteristics independently of all but the thinnest presupposition about the content of this attitude. Still, VMP may also be regarded as *non-viciously* circular, or, as it is often called, a “no-priority” (McDowell, 1998b:160) view of this value—a view on which the value and the attitude must be explained reciprocally. This is because one may reasonably ask: why is *aesthetic* pleasure characterized by *these* eight features? The answer is because they best reflect what intuitively seems to be the thinnest *formal* profile of most of the objects that we correctly appreciate for their aesthetic value. In this sense, the characterization of the attitude appeals to a thin, formal and pre-theoretical understanding of the value, just as much as the characterization of the value appeals to a thin formal understanding of the attitude it merits. This is what is meant by a no-priority view of value. Still, even if the account is circular in this way, it is not viciously circular thanks to its explanatory power and the inferiority of any attempt to elucidate aesthetic value “without that detour” through AP. As I argue below, compared to other approaches, VMP is the most viable and the most explanatory potent account of aesthetic value.³⁵ To quote Wiggins:

Circularity as such is no objection to [a view of value], provided that the offending formulation is also *true*. . . . by tracing out such a circle, [one] hopes to elucidate the concept of value by

³⁵ Even critics of no-priority accounts acknowledge that the “beautiful and other aesthetic properties” (Jacobson 2011) may well admit only of a no-priority account.

displaying it in its actual involvement with the sentiments. One would not . . . have sufficiently elucidated what value is *without* that detour. (1987: 189)

3. Why VMP?

In this section, I present a few observations that support the idea that aesthetic valuable objects merit the affective attitude I call aesthetic pleasure. Think of them as considerations in favor of taking this idea seriously (but not as conclusive arguments for VMP).

First, consider the opening lines of the paper. Recall how often we communicate our aesthetic responses and recommendations in terms of our likes and dislikes. VMP has an explanation of this, and is supported by the phenomenon.

Second, notice how intuitive is the idea that at least certain kinds of feelings *reveal* certain kinds of values. Understanding that a person is kind, amiable or sexist on a certain occasion is often made possible and explained by *feeling* gratitude or companionship or indignation. The claim is not that these feelings are *necessary* for believing the situation to be such or for judging the person thusly. We may well be able to gain knowledge of these propositions, or at least a warranted belief that this situation requires kindness, and that this person is sexist on the basis of testimony alone, independently of feeling, and so we might gain epistemic access to these values and disvalues independently of feeling. Yet the all too common nature of the following scenario and of others of its kind strongly suggests that such values *can be*, and *often are*, revealed through feelings alone: I may be unable to articulate fully and exactly enough why a person was gentle on this occasion, but add, “but I am quite confident; I felt it. Didn’t you feel it too?” Such bit of discourse is quite ordinary, suggesting that we do commonly think of feelings as revealing certain values and disvalues to us.

Relatedly, many aspects of our lives, many values, call for and merit, not only beliefs and actions, but certain kinds of feelings. A tragic hero, like Oedipus, deserves pity from everyone. Being responsive to his tragedy requires that we *feel* pity. The same goes for those people and situations that call for empathy, for certain forms of collective forgiveness, for moral outrage and many other feelings. Why can't aesthetic value be, similarly, that which calls for and merit a particular kind of feeling? Why can't aesthetic value belong to "A familiar set of concepts with an especially tight connection to the human emotional repertoire [which] concerns the sentimental values," where these values are connected to sentiments by *meriting* them? As mentioned above, this is a familiar idea in meta-ethics. Placing aesthetic value alongside these affective (or "sentimental") values and disvalues helps to make VMP plausible, and to point to the virtues it shares with Neo-Sentimentalist theories of value. For example, like the latter, VMP does justice not only to the connection between sentiments and values, but, at the same time, to the well-noticed gap between sentimental appearance and evaluative reality, and, so, to the possibility of erroneous aesthetic evaluations. Moreover, given the notorious challenges facing any attempt to characterize this value by appeal to a list of properties (2.1)—by appeal to a robust picture of the content of this value—VMP's characterization of this value in terms of a merited affective attitude is a virtue. These are considerable strengths of the view.

Now consider how well-suited VMP is to explain the shape and the aim of aesthetic exchanges, and, correspondingly how the latter supports VMP. Intuitively, at least, it seems that other than in very special circumstances, when we recommend a film or an album to others, we don't wish them *merely* to *believe* that the film or the album is valuable in the way we claim it is. Rather, we want them to *enjoy* it for themselves. While others *may well be able* to believe, on the basis of our recommendation, that these works are valuable, such a belief is rarely the aim of

aesthetic recommendations. *Mere belief* devoid of pleasure would, most often, be accepted with a sense of disappointment, not with a sense of successfully achieving one's aim in making the recommendation in the first place. For example, Abigail, my friend, may well tell me that, after my recommendation and two months of reading the novels, she believes me that Elena Ferrante's tetralogy the *Neapolitan Novels* is aesthetically excellent. But she may add that she "must confess" (as she puts it), that it is not to her liking. Hearing Abigail, I'd most likely be disappointed, thinking that "confession" is just the right term to describe her speech act, a term that captures a certain failure of responsiveness. And believing the novels to be aesthetically valuable as she might, I would nonetheless think that Abigail *missed* something—the *beauty of the novels*. Aesthetic exchanges aim to facilitate the hearer's own (responsive and cognitive) pleasure.³⁶

This understanding of the aim or logic of the practice is often shared by both aesthetic affectivists, like VMP advocates, and non-affectivists. Consider, for example, the non-affectivist Noël Carroll. Even though he recently argued against affectivism concerning the aesthetic appreciation of art, he nonetheless agreed with the affectivist that, by cultivating understanding of a work in others, we *aim* to cultivate in them *positive feelings* toward it. According to Carroll, the relation between understanding and pleasure or liking "is undoubtedly the thinking that lies behind art-appreciation courses. Understanding the sonata form, it is hoped, the student will cultivate a liking of it. And undeniably that sometimes happens; indeed, it even happens often" (Carroll, 2016:7). The aim, not only of aesthetic communications and recommendations, but even of aesthetic education, according to this line, is to cultivate liking.

³⁶ Nor is belief the aim of *criticism*. On that, see Cross 2017.

Likewise, even those who deny that “we ought to like great art,” think that, “[a]rt critics view as truism the claim that one ought to like good art” (Hein, 1967: 209). Why do the experts in this practice, who are trained to, and skilled in achieving its aim, take this as a truism, unless they were indeed aiming to get their readers to *like* good art?

If the goal of aesthetic recommendations and conversations is indeed to facilitate one’s liking or pleasure, not only one’s beliefs that the value obtain, then VMP has a great explanation of this. Briefly, this is the explanation: since to evaluate something to have aesthetic merit is to evaluate it to merit pleasure, doing so by feeling this pleasure is not simply a way of tracking the facts about the work’s value, but, also, *at one stroke*, a way of responding to it in the way that is non-contingently tied to its having that value: it is a way of being *responsive* to its having the value. To evaluate an object *in and by* feeling AP is to evaluate it correctly while, *at the same time*, to respond to it as that evaluation entails that one should. In contrast, the non-affective evaluator has true beliefs about the object’s value, but she is not *true to* its having this value. Her states are true but not responsive. (This is another way of saying that the correctness of AP is irreducible to theoretical correctness, that is, to mere accuracy or truth. Instead, it is constrained by responsiveness too.) And, notice, what the affective evaluator does right that the non-affective evaluator does not is to respond in the way that lies at the heart of the kind of value the evaluation of which is in question (in both cases). It is not that the affective evaluator gets ‘two check marks’ (one for truth and one for responsiveness) and the non-affective evaluator gets only one (for truth). The setup is *not* that of ‘2 (achievements) vs. 1 (achievement).’ Rather, the contrast between the two evaluators is of ‘the relevant achievement vs. none,’ since, in line with the observations about the logic of aesthetic exchanges, belief about aesthetically valuable objects is at best the starting point. At worst, it is beside the point.

Now note what might be regarded as a variant of Moore's Paradox concerning aesthetic merit. Consider the statement, "Henry James' *The Ambassadors* is a great novel but it merits no liking." Intuitively, this claim sounds odd, requiring further explanation. Why is that so? On a straightforward explanation, this is so because aesthetic greatness merits *enjoying* or *liking* the work. This is exactly the core commitment of VMP.

Finally, even the non-affectivist admits, "nobody doubts pleasure's close alliance with aesthetic value" (Lopes, 2018: 199).

The view gets further support when compared with other candidates. That's the task of the next two sections.

4. Against Hedonism

One problem with these observations is that some of them may support hedonism about aesthetic value as much as they support VMP. But VMP is to be preferred to aesthetic hedonism about value, not on account of its way of doing justice to, and explaining, the phenomena recorded in these observations, but on account of hedonism's (1) failure to explain what is wrong with what James Shelly instructively called aesthetic overvaluations,³⁷ (2) difficulty to propose plausible standards of correctness for aesthetic evaluations, standards that do justice to the practice, and (3) inability to explain what I take to be a strong intuition, put forward and defended by Susan Wolf (2015): the intuition that some aesthetically valuable objects would have been aesthetically valuable even if they did not benefit anyone, hedonically or otherwise.

³⁷ Shelley 2011.

Shelley shows, convincingly, I believe, that the hedonist cannot explain the problem with aesthetically overvaulting objects, or in my terms, the problem with liking objects more than they aesthetically merit. Instead of rehashing his arguments, I will develop the last two worries just mentioned, focusing on Mohan Matthen's recent and most promising version of aesthetic hedonism (2017, 2018). According to Matthen, "[A]n artwork's merit rests on the feelings that it arouses in its intended audience" (2018: 20). On his view, "we judge objects to have aesthetic merit when they are a good fit for our psychological attitudes" (2017: 15, cf. 20).³⁸ Are there reasons to believe that VMP is to be preferred to a hedonic account like Matthen's? Here I present only two such reasons.

First, think about the normativity of aesthetic disagreements. When we disagree about the pleasure of eating oatmeal for breakfast or the pleasure of running on the beach on a crisp morning in late Spring, the only standards of correctness available to us to settle the disagreement, if any, are robustly relativized and private. In these cases, there seems to be no room for cognitive fault: if we disagree about these two matters, both of our judgments may be correct given that eating oatmeal in the morning and running on a crisp morning fit my constitution, preferences and needs, and thus tend to give *me* pleasure, but strongly disagree with your constitution, preferences and needs, and thus tend to displease you. If so, both of us are correct. No one is at fault. A disagreement about, say, the pleasure in beholding Gustave Caillebotte's *The Floor Scrapers*, is different. There is a growing consensus that, at least in many cases of aesthetic disagreement, one of us is at fault: we cannot both be right.³⁹ Aesthetic

³⁸ And see Matthen's central hedonist brief at the opening of the paper.

³⁹ E.g., Hopkins (2001), Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).

disagreements and agreements, the line goes, are a matter of non-private, non-relativized correctness, and any proper account of aesthetic value should be able to explain that. What would the hedonist say?

Matthen briefly addresses the issue of correctness, claiming that he wishes to account for correctness in terms of “the way that is maximally productive of this kind of pleasure provided that this does not contradict fact” (2017: 20). But, I worry that the notion of “fact” at stake is insufficient for the kind of correctness required by the majority of aesthetic disagreements. By “fact,” Matthen seems to mean “plain facts”—facts about whether or not, to use his example, *Pride and Prejudice* is about zombies. But such facts cannot settle many a familiar aesthetic disagreement, not even those that seem most simple. Consider the following case. If I enjoy the novel as perceptive and you do not, but enjoy it as a reminder of your daughter’s good qualities, one of us is wrong, even if neither evaluation contradicts the (plain) facts, that is, even if Elisabeth Bennett indeed resembles your daughter in the relevant respect. Matthen’s explanation fails here. Appealing to those experiences that maximize pleasure and to plain rather than value-laden facts about the work, at best explain these kinds of normative failure inelegantly. At worst, Matthen’s strategy doesn’t explain correctness at all. Valuable features of the work—those that constitute its value independently of whether they produce pleasure—provide simpler and more successful explanations. On VMP, one of us is wrong because one of us fails to apprehend and be responsive to the features that in fact make the novel valuable and thus merit aesthetic pleasure; full stop.

Second, and very briefly, the hedonist cannot account for those aesthetically valuable objects, particularly artworks, which are, in Wolf’s memorable phrase, “good for nothings” (2015). The bare bones of the argument is this: even though the life of no one may have been

worse off without certain works and objects—Wolf speaks mainly about the paintings of the Dutch painter Gerrit Dou—those works would have still been great artworks. Suppose that no one benefited from Dou’s paintings: Dou could have been a flourishing scientist, and we could have marveled instead at the works of another excellent Dutch painter of the same period. Dou’s works may have not benefited anyone, hedonically or otherwise. But, the intuition goes, they would have *nonetheless* been valuable even if, counterfactually, they may have not benefitted anyone, let alone given pleasure to anyone. If so, it seems that the value of great artworks cannot be explained by their benefits, hedonic or otherwise.

Of course, the hedonist can deny this counterfactual. But I find it a powerful one. The hedonist, then, owes us a further story: either deny the counterfactual or show us how hedonism may account for it. Since VMP does not explain aesthetic value in terms of its benefiting anyone, but as a value that *merits* pleasure insofar as it is good independently of its power to please, VMP is to be preferred to hedonism on this count too.

5. Against (Non-Affectivist) Doxastic and Practical Competitors

Proponents of VMP don’t deny that aesthetic value merits and thus justifies beliefs and a variety of different actions. I claim only that aesthetic value cannot be *characterized* as that which merits either the belief that it obtains or actions that promote it. I deny that it can be characterized in terms of normative support for belief or action. Why? Most generally because of what seems like the derivative and (counterfactually) dependent nature of these doxastic and practical attitudes when it comes to aesthetic value. Think of this (counterfactual) dependence as follows: the facts that bear on whether an object is aesthetically valuable merit and thus justify (serve as normative support for) believing that they are so and acting in ways that promote their being such only if

they also merit and thus justify AP. Whether an aesthetically valuable object merits the belief that the value obtains and an action that promotes this value counterfactually depends on whether it merits AP. For example, if facts about *Ziggy Stardust* do not justify AP, they do not justify the belief that it is aesthetically valuable. If facts about the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Dresden do not justify AP, they do not justify actions for promoting its aesthetic value, such as conserving the cathedral. This seems hard to deny. Let me explain this in more detail.

5.1 Belief?

What is the problem with *characterizing* aesthetic value as that which merits and justifies belief?

First, recall the discussion of the logic of aesthetic exchanges and recommendations (section 3). If aesthetic value merited belief (alone) merely by being the kind of value that it is, then why there would ever be a sense of disappointment if our exchanges and recommendations yielded only belief but not aesthetic liking of the sort I described above? If all we said when we told a friend that, say, the new Jerry Lewis album is beautiful is that the album merits her belief that it is beautiful, why should we be disappointed, or think that she missed something, if she claimed that she believed that the album was aesthetically valuable, but did not like it, did not wish to listen to it ever again and so on and so forth? Our disappointment, dissatisfaction, and the sense of failing to achieve our aim in response to a friend's claim to believe that an object we recommended is aesthetically valuable but not to like it suggest that, *without further explanation*, aesthetic value cannot merit *belief* simply by virtue of being the kind of value that it is.

Second, VMP is to be preferred to any doxastic account of aesthetic value by virtue of its explanatory power. Think of this as an argument to the best explanation. The relevant explanandum is a common intuition about a tension between two apparently opposing

characteristics of aesthetic evaluations. On the one hand, often at least, we seem to require a certain kind of autonomy of our aesthetic evaluations—we often expect and even require that they be made on the basis of one’s own powers and experiences, *first-personally*, not merely on the basis of the powers of another. We may, for example, rightly refuse to accept a recommendation or an evaluation of a work, if it is not based on one’s first-person experience of it, just as we may refuse to accept a recommendation of a dish that one never tasted oneself. On the other hand, we often regard aesthetic evaluations as (in some important respect) cognitive: we seek, for example, to settle disagreements by assuming that, between two disagreeing parties, one is at fault, at least in many paradigmatic cases. An account of aesthetic value should, ideally, account for the tension between the (at least seeming) first-personal and the (at least seeming) cognitive nature of (at least many) aesthetic evaluations.⁴⁰

VMP can accommodate this tension better than any doxastic competitor since, on VMP, the attitude fittingly appropriate to aesthetic value is a *cognitive kind of pleasure* that no one can feel for another. As cognitive, though, this pleasure purports to present (and when correct, succeeds in presenting) this value. So, VMP can explain *both* the common requirement to evaluate an aesthetically valuable object first-personally and the (at least seeming) cognitive nature of aesthetic evaluations, as those that could either be fitting or unfitting to their object. On that count, friends of VMP fare better than friends of the doxastic picture since the latter need some additional mechanism, over and above their basic account of aesthetic value, in order to

⁴⁰ Hopkins (2001), Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018), Nguyen (forthcoming.).

explain this dual nature of aesthetic evaluation. VMP is to be preferred to its doxastic competitors on account of its explanatory power.⁴¹

5.2. Action?

Aesthetically valuable objects typically merit and justify many kinds of action, for example, they merit their exhibition, preservation and conservation. They indeed merit these and many other actions, so much so that we may not do right by them if we fail on this practical front. Nevertheless, VMP is to be preferred to any practical characterization of aesthetic value for the following reasons.

First, no practical account of aesthetic value can be as unified as VMP. VMP gives a unified picture of the attitude that this value makes appropriate—it is AP. The actions that aesthetically valuable objects merit are various, and depend on the *peculiarities* of each one of them. So, there is no one action that aesthetically valuable objects merit *qua* aesthetically valuable. There can be no unified practical account of aesthetic value.

Moreover, it seems that actions and the normative support for them do not *directly* bear on whether an object is aesthetically valuable. They bear on this question only indirectly via AP and the normative support for it. The normative support for actions regarding aesthetically valuable objects counterfactually depend on the normative support for AP such that, if facts about an object did not serve as a normative support for this pleasure, they would not serve as a normative support for acting in ways that promote this value. Translating Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* to English on account of their aesthetic excellence is justified only if the facts

⁴¹ For a full version of this argument, see Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).

that are taken to justify this action also justify aesthetic pleasure.⁴² Thomas Branchick's (of the *High Museum* in Atlanta) recent conservation of Giovanni Francesco Barbieri's *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* is justified as an act of conserving the painting on account of its aesthetic merit only if the facts that are taken to support this action also support AP in the painting. *Any* action done on account of, or in promotion of, aesthetic value is justified by facts about the object *only if* these facts also justify AP. And so any normative support for acting on account of, or in promotion of, aesthetic value counterfactually depends on the normative support for AP. VMP is not only more unified, but also more basic and more fundamental than any practical account of aesthetic value.

6. Ending with the Source of Aesthetic Value

In this paper, I attempted to explain only what *marks* a value as an *aesthetic* value, not to explain the source of this value. I wished to remain neutral, even agnostic, about the normative question “what makes aesthetically valuable objects *valuable*?” The only commitment I made in this respect was “negative”: VMP involves a commitment to the claim that it is neither pleasure nor the power to please that makes objects aesthetically valuable. A hedonic view of the source of aesthetic value is, at best, unsatisfactory. I also suggested that the distinctive instantiations of aesthetic value greatly vary from object to object in part because they supervene on the specific response-independent properties of each specific object and the ways in which these properties interact with each other.

⁴² The example is an example of *acting for a (specific) reason*: the action of *translating the novel on account of their aesthetic value* (rather than merely the action of translating the novels).

Nevertheless, in concluding, I would gesture towards my favorite answer to the normative question. This answer is primitivist in spirit: an answer that trades on the notion of a “basic value,” where this refers to a value that need not be analyzed further. On such a primitivist picture, there is much that we can say about the value of *specific* aesthetically valuable objects. *The Ambassadors* is aesthetically excellent on account of its fine sentences, which are loaded with meaning, on account of its intricate characters, which are expressed even by their tone of voice, and so on and so forth. The garden of the Meigetsuin temple in Kamakura (Japan) is beautiful on account of its summer hydrangeas, rock gardens, steps, bridges and the ways in which all of these complement each other. On the primitivist picture I like, most of what we can say in an answer to the normative question is that specific instantiations of aesthetic value are realized by the properties that these specific objects have and the ways in which those properties align with each other. It is those properties, in the particular ways in which they are deployed in specific works of art, natural objects, people, garments, furniture and other objects, that account for the specific instantiations of aesthetic value that each of these is.

But while these specific questions about individual aesthetically valuable objects make *a lot of sense*, and are at the heart of our aesthetic conversations, recommendations, art criticisms and so forth, the general question “why are aesthetically valuable objects in general valuable or good?” makes as little sense as the questions “why are virtuous people good?” “why is a life of well-being good?”

The core commitment of the primitivist picture is to the claim that aesthetically valuable objects are *not* aesthetically valuable or good *because* of any benefits that they may bring to human beings. Of course, these objects *do* benefit us; greatly benefit us, aesthetically, personally, cognitively, morally, in terms of our well-being and more. They are extremely significant to our

lives. But they are not valuable *on that account*. The primitivist I have in mind is committed only to a direction of explanation: aesthetically valuable objects benefit us *because* they are valuable. They are not valuable because they benefit us. But they are valuable, very valuable, *aesthetically* valuable, and *as such*, I have argued in this paper, they merit the affective attitude I call aesthetic liking or pleasure.⁴³

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