

Aesthetic Life and Why It Matters, by Dominic McIver Lopes, Bence Nanay, and Nick Riggle
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In this short but rich book, three leading specialists in aesthetics have teamed up to introduce the topic of aesthetics as a branch of value theory. Apart from the introduction and a “Note for Instructors,” the book is not co-authored in the usual sense, but consists of one chapter by each author, followed by a “Breakout” section written in dialogic form.

The book is intended to be used as a self-contained text for an aesthetics unit in an introductory philosophy course. One might have some reservations about using it in such a way. A practical-minded reservation is simply that this forecloses another promising route into aesthetics, via the nature and ontology of the arts. The authors presumably endorse some distinction between philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of the arts, but the overlap between the two is non-accidental, and the arts, as these authors are well aware, can be engaged without a worryingly elitist focus on the ‘fine arts’: games, street art, food, fashion, and digital art all raise fascinating metaphysical and interpretive issues. Still, pedagogical choices have to be made, and this is a reasonable one.

Yet even restricting aesthetics to value theory, a more substantive reservation is that the authors’ agreement is so vociferous as to crowd out lively debate. They are united in opposition to hedonism about aesthetic value, Kantianism about aesthetic judgment, and, it would seem, any robust defense of evaluative comparisons between particular artworks. But many of these views will make most sense only when taught alongside traditional texts by Hume and Kant. It’s also worth noting that the relation between aesthetic and moral value, a debate one can profitably present as dating back to Plato and Aristotle, gets no mention here. The focus is squarely on aesthetic engagement.

Nanay’s contribution spotlights aesthetic engagement as an achievement. The bulk of the chapter is taken up with plausible arguments against rival explanations of why we care about the aesthetic domain, including mere entertainment, social status, and—most interestingly—for the purpose of making aesthetic judgments. As he points out, it’s hard to see why we would invest so much time and money on aesthetic engagement solely for the sake of rendering a final evaluative verdict.

Nanay’s positive proposal is that we care about aesthetic experiences, characterized minimally in terms of attention to “the relation between the perceived object and the character of our own experience” (24). When I have an aesthetic experience of David Hockney’s *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*, I attend not only to the painting’s properties, but also to how I feel, and, crucially, to which of the painting’s properties evoke which affects. Notably, Nanay does not claim that such attention is sufficient for aesthetic experience, only necessary: presumably I don’t have an aesthetic experience when I try to figure out what it is about my mother’s remark that makes me feel bad.

This proposal is meant to be capacious enough to include, without being limited to, the historically influential conception of aesthetic experience as disinterested. Nanay writes that “what’s special about this form of aesthetic experience is that our attention is open-ended and distributed among the many properties of the object we are looking at” (23). Yet it’s not obvious that distributed attention to properties of the *object* is a way of attending to the *relation* between the object and one’s experience. Ironically, the positive proposal might have been better secured by leaning more heavily on a Kantian conception of aesthetic experience, which is partially constituted by self-reflexive attention to the appropriateness of one’s pleasure to its object.

Nanay gestures at the possibility of a Kantian “experience/judgment hybrid” (21), but claims that really what we care about is aesthetic experience, not aesthetic judgment. He might have preserved a secondary role for judgment by aligning himself with Thi Nguyen’s (2020) striving account of aesthetic engagement, on which we don’t engage with aesthetic objects for the sake of making judgments about their aesthetic properties, but rather aim at making correct aesthetic judgments for the sake of the experience of engagement. One might argue, on behalf of such a synthesis, that this aim of correctness is best realized by the form of attention Nanay identifies. This would not only preserve a role for aesthetic judgment while insisting on the primacy of experience, but would also yield a rationalizing explanation of why aesthetic attention has the form it does.

What makes aesthetic experience an achievement? While the distributed attention proposal will be familiar to readers of Nanay (2016, Ch. 2), the discussion of achievement is new. Nanay is impressed by the fact that we can try but fail to have an aesthetic experience. The view seems to be that, much like falling asleep, we can take steps to prepare, but it’s not fully within our control. But all his examples of “aesthetic experience going wrong” (27) are examples of failed attention, and it’s difficult to see why what we attend to, or even how we attend, isn’t fully within our control, especially once we rid ourselves of distractions. We need to know what is missing from an experience of undistracted distributed attention such that it might not yet be an aesthetic experience.

Even if this could be explained, however, achievement would seem doubly irrelevant. Nanay claims that aesthetics matters because aesthetic experience is an achievement, and achievements matter. (It’s plausible, though he doesn’t put it this way, that achievements possess final value.) Unlike Lopes (2018), who takes achievement to ground aesthetic reasons to act, whether or not agents are aware that their acts are achievements, Nanay claims that aesthetic experience yields “a sense of accomplishment, that is, a sense of what *you* have accomplished” (28). But if aesthetic experience is not fully up to us, it’s hard to see why this appearance of achievement should be veridical. Falling asleep at night doesn’t merit a sense of accomplishment.

Moreover, locating achievement in the appreciator misdescribes the phenomenology of appreciation. When I admiringly appreciate Cate Blanchett’s performance in *Tár*, I don’t

judge that *I* have achieved something, but that Blanchett has. The salient locus of achievement is the artist: I appreciate what the artist has achieved, albeit not necessarily *qua* achievement of the artist. (Though matters may be different when it comes to video games and other participatory arts.) And since Nanay allows that not all aesthetic experiences are achievements (25), it's unclear what the value of those other experiences would be.

I devoted somewhat more space to Nanay's contribution since his views on achievement are novel, whereas Riggle's and Lopes' proposals are elaborated in detail elsewhere. But Riggle's chapter, which focuses on aesthetic engagement as a source of community, is a real gem. Developing an extended analogy to food, understood as whatever is worth eating, Riggle argues that aesthetic value is whatever is worth incorporating into our social practice of aesthetic valuing, where that practice itself realizes the goods of individuality, aesthetic freedom, and aesthetic community. The analogy is well worth unpacking in detail with students, and eases us into hunting for the many goods that aesthetic practices afford. One challenge for Riggle's approach, of which he is aware, is to say what demarcates aesthetic value, aesthetic freedom, and aesthetic community from non-aesthetic forms of these notions. A more serious challenge may be to account for the pre-theoretical difference between positive and negative aesthetic values: if a flourishing aesthetic community can form around the appreciation of bad movies, does that thereby make wooden acting and incoherent editing into positive aesthetic values?

Lopes' chapter offers readers of his landmark *Being for Beauty* (2018) the most accessible introduction to the 'network theory' yet, though for undergraduates it will undoubtedly remain the most difficult of the three pieces. Lopes sees the aesthetic domain as fragmented into social practices—such as West African djembe music, Inca stonework, and Japanese manga—which are individuated by their aesthetic profiles: the aesthetic values they assign to the objects they concern. Aesthetic engagement is not limited to appreciation, but happens whenever an agent acts with an eye to correctly representing the aesthetic value of some item within a practice. Here, Lopes is more explicit that the value of aesthetic engagement is that it serves our interest in “exploring plural practices of value” (76). He may be right that “it's not in the nature of aesthetic life to breed conflict” (82), but some aesthetic practices do seem to attribute negative aesthetic values to the same items that are celebrated in others. Though Lopes cites Joseph Raz for support, it's noteworthy that Raz himself writes that “conflict is endemic ... to value pluralism” (1994, p. 179).

A final section sets up a dialogue about five sites of potential differences, yet even here we find the co-authors irenically smoothing out, rather than furthering, any disagreements. All three deny that aesthetic judgments are subjective, accept the dynamism of aesthetic practices, are at pains to avoid Eurocentrism, and believe that oppressive beauty myths should be combated. Probably the biggest difference concerns aesthetic disagreement itself, since Lopes believes in the importance of convergence on aesthetic value judgments

between agents within a practice, whereas Riggle denies that aesthetic communities require such convergence. Again, though, this issue seems to me best engaged, in an undergraduate course, with some reference to the universalism of Kant and Hume.

What is aesthetic life, anyway? For the authors, it seems to be nothing more than an active interest in aesthetic value, which we already have: “a concern with aesthetic value is simply part of what it is to be alive, to be human” (3). The amoralist’s cousin, the anaesthete, plays no role here, either as a live possibility or as a merely heuristic device to help uncover our reasons to live the aesthetic life we are already living.

Why does aesthetic life matter? The authors write, “We know that such a life does matter. The puzzle is why” (7). But it’s a little hard to see what the puzzle is, especially if aesthetic life is inescapable and the goal is not to convince the anaesthete. On the one hand, there is a view on which there is ultimately *no* puzzle here. According to primitivists, aesthetic value is not constituted by any value more basic than the value we find aesthetically valuable objects, as such, to have (Gorodeisky 2021, Shelley 2022). But our authors all take aesthetic value to have its source elsewhere; as Riggle puts it, for instance, “The goodness of aesthetic value derives from the value of these special forms of human life and love” (53). The value of aesthetic life is grounded in some other, not distinctively aesthetic, value.

On the other hand, there are views on which the puzzle has much *more* bite, notably views on which an ‘aesthetic life’ refers to a life devoted exclusively to the appreciation and/or creation of artistic masterpieces. What Lopes (2018, pp. 63-4) has called the ‘Levinhume’ deduction was one sophisticated attempt at a solution, appealing to a Millian notion of qualitatively greater pleasures to argue that we should all appreciate as true judges do. But Lopes is concerned to rebut this argument, while Nanay says it “embodies a form of normativity that we should all be very suspicious about” (18), and Riggle claims that aesthetic value is “not something any of us is *obligated* to pursue” (57). One question is whether Riggle can consistently maintain this position while also holding that, as he puts it, we can “waste our time on bad art, ugly clothes, sucky bands” (90). But a broader question is why these authors seem so skeptical of any strong form of aesthetic normativity.

To my mind, the more interesting puzzle arises once we accept that some aesthetic lives are better than others. In virtue of what are they better, and what kind of normative pull do the better lives have? Although a primitivist view of aesthetic reasons, on which we simply have reason to appreciate the aesthetically valuable as such, should also be on the table, it is not implausible to hold that some aesthetic lives are superior in virtue of embodying the very values our authors identify, namely greater achievement, community, or diversity. Read in this light, this book is a wonderful resource not only for students, but for anyone attracted to a non-primitivist account of how aesthetic value is reason-giving.

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